

NOVEL
21

Written by
Rifujin na
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Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation



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WRITTEN BY
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Claire

Zenith

Blessed Child

Geese

Rudeus

**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**

“Arm, absorb!”



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Seven Seas Entertainment

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*“Maybe they made a few mistakes, but it was
for the sake of love.”*

—No matter how much your parents suck,
they’re still your parents.

*AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT*

Chapter 1: Playing Dumb

WE TOUCHED DOWN in the Adventurers' District. It must have been...ten or fifteen minutes since we took off?

"Whew." I exhaled.

I'd practiced this a bunch, so I rarely botched a landing when coming down from a magic leap anymore. No broken legs from the impact this time. It might have only been fifteen minutes in the air, but since Zenith's disappearance, several hours had already passed. I needed to find her, quickly. As impatient as I was to get going, we needed to think this through.

When I'd returned to Cliff's house, Zenith was gone. Apparently, Geese had taken her on a walk. I'd thought she'd surely be back before long, but there was still no sign of her even as night crept up on us. Geese might have been an S-ranked adventurer, but he was no good in a fight, and he was a demon besides. Everyone knew how demonfolk were treated in the Holy Country of Millis. Because he could pass for beastfolk, Geese avoided some of the abuse, but it was possible the city guard had gotten the wrong idea and arrested him for kidnapping a mentally impaired woman. I also didn't want to think about what the Latria family would do if they heard that Zenith was off with a demon... Claire Latria, that old bat, wanted to force Zenith to get married in her current state. Who knew what that woman was capable of?

I needed to get Zenith in my sight and under my protection as soon as possible.

"Let's get going, Aisha."

"W-wait a sec, Big Brother..." Aisha replied. She sank to the ground, her legs shaking so badly that her knees knocked together. She seemed to be too weak to stand.

"There's no time, come on," I said.

“O-okay, but...can we at least walk on the ground?”

Ah, so Aisha didn't like heights. That was my bad. I seemed to be surrounded by people who were bad with heights. Sylphie was terrified of high places, and I wasn't that keen on them myself. I bet Eris liked them, though... Ugh, now wasn't the time to be thinking about that.

“If we run along the ground we'll cause a traffic accident,” I said. “Come on, let's go find Zenith.”

Right now we had to think about searching—for Zenith, or for Geese who was with her. I couldn't leave her alone in her current condition.

“Bleh... I can't walk.”

“Fine, I'll give you a piggyback ride.”

“You're not gonna fly?”

“I won't,” I said as I hoisted Aisha up off the ground onto my back.

Now to begin the investigation. The Adventurers' District was big, though. Where to start?

“How about checking the taverns, Big Brother? It's dinner time. Maybe they went out to eat somewhere.”

“Oh, good idea.”

I followed Aisha's suggestion, and we jogged along, peering into the taverns that lined the street as we hunted for Zenith or Geese. Everywhere was packed with the dinner crowd, but I didn't have to go inspecting every customer like an idiot. By limiting our questioning to staff we could cut down the time spent at each location. I was sure someone would have seen them. A woman with a vacant stare accompanied by a monkey-faced demon wouldn't be easily forgotten.

Though it had been dark for a while now, the Adventurers' District was still crammed full of people. Adventurers back from a quest and clutching their prizes, and the merchants they bargained with; adventurers done with a job and looking for a meal, and the bar and innkeepers calling out to them. I heard a few fights going on, too. Perhaps because of the time, there weren't any

carriages passing, so it was unlikely that Zenith had gone wandering and gotten pulled under the wheels of one. That, at least, was a relief.

“Monkey-faced? You must mean Geese. Yeah, I saw him over at the Dappled Light Tavern.” At the third tavern, I got a lead. Geese had been in this country a fair while now, and knowing him, his reputation preceded him.

“Did he have a woman with him?” I asked.

“A woman...? Dunno about that...” said the barkeep, frowning.

I figured I might as well go and see for myself. I asked him the address, then pressed a copper coin into his hand with a word of thanks before hurrying off to the Dappled Light Tavern. I had a real bad feeling.

The Dappled Light Tavern was in a bad part of town. Leering men swaggered along, eyeing the women who loitered on the street. I was pretty sure those were prostitutes. We probably weren’t far from the pleasure district. Even Millishion had one, apparently.

The men were looking our way, intrigued. I suppose Aisha and I looked too vanilla to blend in here.

“Ha ha! Well, hey, kid, you come to play then?”

One of them actually came up and started chatting to me. Had I come to play? I was of course always striving to up my game, improve my performance, but right now we weren’t in bed, weren’t doing *that*—

“B-Big Brother, put me down. This is embarrassing!”

Never mind. They were just intrigued by how Aisha clung to my back. I put her down, and the staring stopped.

The sign read *Dappled Light Tavern*. The tavern looked pretty standard, but the patrons coming in and out were a seedy crowd. Long ago, the scowl on the face of the man leaving now would have had me scared witless. Since coming to this world though, I’d grown tough. Now I could even walk, fearless, into a place like this. Honestly, the Ruquag Mercenary Band office in Sharia was more intimidating. Still, I didn’t like thinking about Zenith hanging around in a place

like this. What the hell had Geese been thinking? I liked the guy, but if he'd gotten confused and tried to sell Zenith to a brothel or something, I'd never forgive him. I'd take both his arms. His legs too.

"Welcome!" The barkeep's spirited greeting carried over the general hubbub as we entered. The tavern might have looked shady from the outside, but once inside the atmosphere was friendly. I didn't feel like an outsider here. The patrons weren't all rough types, either. There were plenty of ordinary-looking adventurers too. I quickly scanned the faces in the room, then turned to the barkeep to—

"And then this was the real clever bit: I said, 'I reckon all three teleportation circles are traps, and there's another path!'"

I'd recognize that voice anywhere. In the back of the room, a monkey-faced man was throwing back drinks as he boasted to the young adventurers seated around him. His companions were a boy with spiked-up hair, another with long hair and a nose piercing, and a girl with slightly slanted eyes and hair dyed an unnatural color. He looked like, how should I put it...? Kind of an old poser.

Zenith wasn't there. I looked around the room, but I couldn't see her anywhere.

"...Then, just like I'd suspected, we damn well found one! A secret passage to the boss's rooms..."

I approached the table, and Geese noticed me. In a split second, his expression changed to one of horror.

"Geese," I said.

"H-hey, Boss! I was, uh, I was just talking about you! You lot, this guy here is the Quagmire I told ya about!"

The other three gaped at me. The girl, her hand pressed to her breast, actually leaned her chair back on two legs away from me. What the hell had he been saying about me? It stung a bit, having a girl recoil from me like that. But whatever, that wasn't important right now. I had a mountain of questions for him. But where to begin...? First off, maybe I could lure him into telling me whether the Man-God was involved or not.

“Geese...I didn’t want to believe it,” I said. “You, my enemy...”

“Eh? Say what?”

“He told you everything, right? Visited you in a dream. Told you what I’d do now?”

“Dreams? What’re you talking about?” asked Geese with a nervous laugh. He was deflecting.

I pointed my finger at him and concentrated my magic. Once the Stone Canon formed, it began to spin rapidly, like a drill whose buzzing reverberated around the room. The young adventurers, their eyes wide, made to stand up.



“Stay where you are,” I said brusquely, and they stopped.

I looked into Geese’s eyes and asked again,

“What words did he fill your head with? Tell me everything, and I’ll let you live.”

“Woah, woah! H-hey, c-c-cut that out...! I’m sorry! I don’t know what I did, but it wasn’t my fault! Now, get that thing away from me!” he stuttered.

I drew my finger back a little. Geese jumped from his chair and threw himself on the ground at my feet. Without a hint of dignity, he groveled and apologized.

“Looks like I really messed up! I’m sorry I made you mad, bo—uh, I mean, Rudeus! Look, see how sorry I am?! I just don’t know what I did! Can you just tell me that, so I can apologize properly? You gotta forgive me!”

This all caught me off guard. It wasn’t the reaction I’d expected at all. Maybe he wasn’t serving the Man-God? But no, it was too early to know for sure. Even with that small niggling doubt, however, I felt bad seeing my longtime companion bowing and scraping in front of me.

Eventually, I spoke. “Where’s my mother?”

“Huh?” said Geese, looking up with his head tilted to one side. The expression on his face, red with drink, was one of bewilderment. If he was acting, it was a great performance.

“My mother. Zenith Greyrat.”

“...Zenith? I just showed her around a bit, then took her home...”

“She’s not at the house. That’s why I’m here,” I said, crossing my arms.

Just then, one of the boys snickered. I looked around and saw Aisha was standing beside me, mimicking my pose and nodding. It was just family resemblance—neither of us were in the mood to joke. I glared at the boy and he froze with a tiny squeak. Jeez, what had Geese been telling these people about me?

“Huh... But, here now... I definitely took her home, you know?”

“Where’d you leave her?”

“Where? Well, y’know, at the entry to the Adventurers’ District. A servant from the house came to get her, so I left her with them.”

A servant? *Our* servant? Cliff and I had been at the church headquarters. Aisha had been shopping, and Wendy had been at the house... No, wait. He wasn’t talking about *my* house.

“Someone from the Latria family...?”

“Yeah, yeah. I checked their coat of arms properly and all. They were a Latria servant, no doubt about it,” he said.

My pulse quickened. Zenith had been taken, taken by a servant of the Latrias. *Calm down*, I told myself. *Get your thoughts in order*. First things first: Geese had taken Zenith out. Why?

“What were you doing taking my mother out of the house in the first place?”

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Boss. It’s just been a while since I saw you or her, so I wanted to catch up, that’s all.”

So it had been a whim. Okay, I guess that made sense... But hold on, something didn’t line up.

“How did you know where Cliff lives?”

“‘Cause I went to see the Latrias first. I don’t much like going there, but I thought if you were there to receive me... But then they said something came up and you and Zenith were staying elsewhere, so that’s where I should go. So I came all the way over here.”

“I thought you hated going into the Divine District.”

“That’s just because as a demon...ya never know when someone’s gonna jump you for no reason when you hang around in there. It’s not like I’d rather die or something,” he protested.

His excuse sounded...weak. Too vague. Part of it was probably the alcohol, but maybe something *was* eating at him. There was a pause. But wait, I got it. I knew what had happened. It had gone down like this, give or take a few details:

Yesterday, I let my temper get the best of me at the Latria Manor and stormed out. They must have set a tail on us as we walked home. I was careless,

and they found out where we were staying. I'd been oblivious.

If the Latrias had come and demanded that the Grimors hand over Zenith, they knew they'd be refused. They were in enemy factions, and the current political climate made launching an outright attack on the Grimors untenable. Although the demon expulsionists were ascendent at present, one misstep could mean their downfall. So the Latrias used Geese—a totally ignorant demon dude who'd fallen right into their hands.

Any other day, they'd have driven a creature like him away. But today, they acquired a pawn no one would expect demon expulsionists to use. They manipulated him into bringing Zenith out into the open. They probably didn't grab her immediately because they were concerned about a bodyguard. But there was no bodyguard. I was out, and by horrible coincidence, so was Aisha. Ultimately, luck was on their side. They took Zenith without resistance. And I expected they'd have no qualms feigning ignorance later: *Geese? No, I can't say I know anyone of that name. Why would you ever imagine that we'd be acquainted with a filthy demon?* Or something like that. Now that they'd kidnapped Zenith, they just had to hide her. It would be a simple matter to assign her a carer to keep watch on her.

"H-hey, Boss? What's going on?"

"...When the Latrias told you where we were, did they say anything else?"

"Eh? Um, yeah, they said Zenith must've missed being home, so I should take her out into the city..."

It wasn't fair to blame Geese. He didn't know any better. I was the one who told him that we were going to the Latrias and that we'd be staying there. If he thought I was in there, he was unlikely to suspect anything even when the Latrias welcomed him without their usual harshness. Then they filled his head with their stories—of course he ended up their puppet. I'd been careless. I should have taken Zenith home today. After seeing who the Latrias were we shouldn't have stayed in Millishion a moment longer. It would have taken some time, but I ought to have taken her back to our house, then come back to give the mercenary band's Millishion chapter my undivided attention. It wasn't like I was pressed for time. I'd kept a potential weakness close by me. That was a

mistake. I should have brought Zenith back for some quiet sightseeing after everything was over.

Regret wasn't going to help this late in the game, though. I needed to get Zenith back.

"Geese, the thing is..."

Having softened a little on him, I filled Geese in on everything that had happened, then asked for his help. Yeah, he'd been manipulated, but he wasn't totally blameless either. I was pretty sure he wasn't serving the Man-God after his latest reaction, and we needed every halfway-competent ally we could get in these circumstances.

"...You serious?" said Geese after I finished, his face pained. "Now I think about it, it was weird how the Latrias just told me the address without making a thing of it, even without you there to go in between... I just assumed you'd cleared it with them, Boss. So that's why they said to take her outside..."

I'd been reckless and shown my enemy my weak point. But everyone makes mistakes. I'd get Zenith back right away.

"Okay, I'm in. I'll help you out," said Geese.

"Thanks," I replied.

With Geese on board, we decided to head straight for the Latria manor... though I was half-despairing. This wasn't how we'd get her back.

The manor was dead silent. It was past dinner time now, far closer to bedtime. I'd been carrying two people with me, and that slowed me down. So, I got us there as quickly as possible. Aisha looked like she might cry.

"You promised..." she muttered.

You can guess the route we took.

"They're still up," I said.

The lights were still on in the manor, yet there was no one at the gate, not even a bell. What were you supposed to do if you wanted to call them? Maybe

people just yelled. How did they plan on receiving guests? But then they probably meant to turn away anyone calling at this hour without consideration. Oh, well.

“It’s Rudeus!” I yelled banging on the gate. “Is anyone home?”

If the neighbors complained, that wasn’t my problem. It was perhaps a stretch to say justice was on my side, but I had probable cause. If the Latrias were behind Zenith’s kidnapping, they were in the wrong. If they weren’t, then the servant Geese had met was both an imposter and the real kidnapper. I’d done my best to cut all ties with this family, but if someone was using their name falsely, that was their problem as well. But no one came out. I banged on the gate harder and yelled some more. The force of my blows strengthened by my Magic Armor bent the gate’s golden latticework further and further out of shape.

“I need to talk to you about my mother!” I called out. But of course, no reply came.

Well, about time to smash my way in.

“If you don’t get out here, I’ll beat your gate down!” I warned.

Just in case they didn’t answer, I concentrated magic in my right hand. If they thought this flimsy gate could stop me, they didn’t know me.

“Whoa there, Boss, hold on! That’s not gonna end well!”

That stopped me. It was true, breaking down the gate was extreme. This situation was getting to me—I was getting frantic. The other day Claire had insisted on marrying Zenith off and making her have babies. Find a partner, hold a wedding, set up house, have kids... Actually, thinking through that whole time-consuming process, we still had time. No need to panic. If I kept an eye on the Latrias’ movements, they would eventually lead me to Zenith. There was one weak link in that lengthy chain of events, though. You just had to zoom in on the “having kids” link, and *ta-da!* There it was.

If you got a man and a woman, threw them in bed together and waited about thirty minutes, that was all the time you needed. It’d be what they called a *fait accompli*; by the time I found Zenith, chances were high that *that* egg would

already be scrambled. I wanted to believe Claire wouldn't be that ruthless about her own daughter, but I couldn't put anything past a hag who'd marry off her mentally impaired daughter. That was why I needed to hurry.

Even so, breaking down the gate was rash. I could have broken through in one shot with my Stone Cannon, but the bang would have garnered attention. I didn't know the laws of this country, but in most of them, breaking down a gate is a crime. If people came and called the police and I ended up a criminal, that would bring trouble on Cliff and the pope as well.

I needed to get a handle on what was happening before I acted.

"You're right. If I use earth magic to open the lock, we can sneak—"

"Sneak where, exactly?" came a voice from the other side of the gate. I looked and saw that, at some point, five men and women had appeared on the other side of the lattice gate. Three soldiers, a butler, and an old woman dressed in fine clothes.

"Whatever do you mean by this? Banging on my gate at this hour."

It was Claire Latria. I was silent for a moment. Had she come out after hearing my voice? Or had she been lying in wait for me...?

"Claire... Isn't this a bit underhanded?"

"What *are* you talking about?"

"I'm talking about how you tricked Geese into helping you abduct my mother."

At this, Claire looked at Geese and frowned.

"Abduct your mother? I'm sure I haven't the faintest idea what you mean."

"I thought you'd play dumb..." I said and gave Geese a meaningful look.

He nodded, then pointed to one of the three guards.

"That one. That's the one who came for Zenith," he said.

I looked at the guard, who shrugged, trying to look innocent. Like he didn't know what we were talking about.

"Doctrine forbids any of our family from fraternizing with demonfolk," said

Claire sharply, with a cold look at Geese. “We would never, ever employ a filthy demon like that.”

No surprises so far.

“If you *believe* Zenith has been abducted, then there ought to be a search party. Perhaps this demon is behind it. I’d like to hear him explain himself, in detail...”

Geese took a step back, grunting in dismay. She meant to shut him up. Now that I thought about it, if Geese had been murdered tonight, then I doubted I’d have ever found my way here. It was a good thing I moved quickly on this.

“You’re telling me you have absolutely no idea where my mother is?”

“None at all. And even if I did, you cut yourself out of this family. I have no obligation to tell you anything.”

The hag just kept layering on that venom... What was her angle? What good would antagonizing me do her? It couldn’t be that she was actually one of the Man-God’s disciples, could it? I couldn’t figure out her deal. Might it also be possible that she truly *didn’t* know anything? In which case, was Geese lying? Why would he do that? He was a liar, but not the kind who did it to hurt people, I was sure.

“Claire...”

She huffed through her nose, turning her cold eyes back to me.

“Yes, Rudeus? If you think I am lying, by all means go ahead and search the house.”

She was confident I wouldn’t find anything, then. Or she’d already moved Zenith elsewhere.

“If that’s quite all, I must ask you to leave now. You are no longer a relation of the Latrias— isn’t that so?”

I was silent. My expression was all bitterness, I’m sure. I had my prime suspect right in front of me, and no way of getting to the truth. I had her right here, but I couldn’t think of what to say.

I was so afraid for Zenith, and yet I’d never get her whereabouts out of this

woman. The thought came to me that at this point I might as well abduct Claire and make her tell me by whatever means necessary. Actually, maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. I had no evidence—only Geese's word. But if it was really true, and the Latrias had taken her...

Wait a minute, calm down, I told myself. Talking came first. I knew when I came she'd probably play dumb. Talking would bring the truth out. A person might look unpleasant until you tried talking to them and found they weren't all bad. Hadn't I just learned that?

"My mother... Is my mother...a relation to the Latria Family?"

"She is my daughter. A mother has an obligation to care for her prodigal children."

"Bullshit! That's what you call forcing her into a marriage she can't consent to?"

Claire didn't reply.

"I'm her *son*. My father told me to protect her with my life, and I'm going to honor that obligation. I'll never abandon her, and so long as I'm alive I'm going to look after her. So please... Give Mom back..."

Claire didn't reply. She did, however, look away, as though she couldn't bear to meet my gaze. What was that about? Was that doubt? Did some part of her think what she was doing was wrong? Claire had never come across as such an awful person when Therese talked about her. There had to be some miscommunication here. Yes, that was it. Right. I had to restrain myself, talk reasonably, and get her to tell me what she wanted...

"The guard is here," Claire said.

I was wrong. She hadn't been averting her eyes from mine, but rather looking at something else. Toward the road. A group who had to be the guard was running toward us, lamps raised.

"If you persevere any further, I will have you arrested as an intruder," she said. "Well?"

I glared back at her. This obstinate, heartless old hag. She wasn't listening to a

thing I said. I imagined taking her as a hostage and using her to demand Zenith's return. This gate meant nothing to me. I could smash through it, lift her up by the throat and shout for the others to bring Zenith out at once.

It would be over in less than two seconds. An instant.

But would it get Zenith back? I made myself look once more into the hag's cold eyes. She didn't look concerned—on the contrary, her eyes seemed to goad me to try it. She couldn't think I was helpless. Last time I was here, I'd flown off the handle. I'd been so angry my own memory was a blur, but I heard later that I'd sent six or seven guards flying. She currently had two guards, with another two running toward us. That was significantly fewer than I'd dealt with last time. Numbers weren't everything, but she had to know I had no issue using force if it came to that. Yet here she was with only this gate between us.

"I could take you captive and make you tell me where Zenith is," I said.

"Please proceed," she spat back at my bravado. "If you think it'll get her back."

How was she so confident? She knew I could do it if I wanted to. She knew I got violent when I was pissed off. Did she not care what happened to her? Why was she doing this? *Shit*, I cursed silently. I really couldn't read her. Was she trying to make me get violent...? In front of the guard, perhaps?

"Claire, you haven't received a message in a dream, have you?"

"Excuse me?" she replied. "A message? What are you on about *now*?"

For just a moment, her ice-cold mask cracked and she gaped at me. That was the face of someone who really didn't know anything—much the same as Geese's earlier. No, she wasn't a disciple of the Man-God either.

The confusion vanished in seconds. With a dismissive tut, she looked away from me and back at the guards running toward us.

"We're the city guard, from the Cathedral Knights' Arrow Company, ma'am! Heard there was a disturbance. Is everything all right?"

"Well, officers, these—"

"Thank you," I cut her off, summoning up my last ounce of rationality. "I'm

done here for today.”

I felt thoroughly defeated as I made my way home along streets lined with houses. My mind was spinning. I knew I wasn't thinking logically. Unspeakable rage and frustration roiled inside me. In the end, I still didn't know where Zenith was. But my conversation with Claire, her tight-lipped expression, and her answers had me convinced. Claire had manipulated Geese and kidnapped Zenith. No doubt in my mind. I probably could have handled things better, but even so. Without bothering to even try to talk things through, she'd abducted Zenith, then played dumb and snubbed me. *Damn it...*

“Hey, I'm sorry about this... I really screwed things up.”

“No, Geese. It's not your fault. You came all the way to the Divine District for my mother, even though you didn't want to.”

“I...I guess,” he said.

Geese hadn't done this. He was a pawn in her scheme and nothing more. The timing seemed a little *too* perfect, but being in the wrong place at the wrong time was how people ended up as pawns. While I was looking the other way, my enemy had been waiting for their moment to strike.

“Geese? Can you ask around about my mother?”

“I can try, but it might be tough.”

“Yeah, that's what I thought...”

Geese was a demon. Passing soldiers eyed him with suspicion just for walking down the street in a residential area like this. It'd be tough indeed for him to ask around for information in the Divine District. The guard might even throw him in jail.

Still, he could be a more subtle kind of help. If the other side were going to play it like that, using whatever cowardly tricks they could, then fine. I had some tricks of my own. From this day on, Rudeus Greyrat was the enemy of the Demon Expulsionists. Old Claire had herself to thank for that.

“Aisha, Geese,” I said to the other two. “What comes next will be a little

dangerous. I'm counting on you both."

"Of course, Big Brother, but what...what are you going to do?" asked Aisha. She sounded nervous. I looked down at her.

"We're going to kidnap the Blessed Child," I replied. Geese jumped up.

"*What?! What's with the crazy talk all of a sudden?!*" He came up to grab my shoulders. "You can't, Boss!"

"The Latrias have strong ties to the Temple Knights, and the Temple Knights are with the Cardinal. They maintain their influence through the Blessed Child, meaning the Blessed Child will make the most effective hostage. Anyone else, there'd be the possibility that they'd just sacrifice that piece, but the Blessed Child guarantees we'll get my mother back."

My opponents had resorted to kidnapping, so I wanted an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I couldn't think of any better candidate than the Blessed Child to use in a hostage exchange.

"Effective, sure, but what about after that?! Assuming we get Zenith back safe, we'll turn the whole of Millis against us!"

Screw the Holy Country of Millis. With Orsted's brute force and Ariel's political clout we'd beat them into submission. I'd given up on operating here. Zenith was way more important in my eyes. The fight against the Man-God mattered, too, but what was this all for if I threw away what I loved most?

"It might be all right for you, Boss, but I'm a demon," Geese whimpered. "After all that—before they know I'm involved with you—they'll kill me!"

The word "kill" slowed me down a little. My head cleared.

Geese was right: if I made enemies of the Latrias—and the Temple Knights along with them—I wouldn't just be putting myself in danger, but everyone around me. And they'd have an army full of types like I'd met earlier today. Who knew what they were capable of? The pope would probably be fine, but Cliff was sure to become a major target.

I remembered that in the future diary, Aisha and Zanoba had been killed by Millishion Knights. If I made Millis my enemy, we wouldn't be safe even back in

Sharia, and that wasn't even getting into the obstacles it would almost certainly throw up against future progress. The followers of Millis were all over the Central Continent; they could easily get in the way. There was no reason the Holy Knights of Millis shouldn't be our allies. If we were enemies when Laplace was reincarnated, no one would be happier about it than the Man-God.

Was kidnapping her even a good move to begin with? But no, surely the Man-God wasn't trying to get me to kidnap the Blessed Child. That was paranoia talking.

Then I recalled something. Behind closed doors, the pope had implied he wanted to do something about the Blessed Child and her cardinalist supporters. If I played things right, I might be able to get Zenith back while also bringing down the Latrias and the cardinal. I wasn't too concerned about coming out on the pope's side. No matter what I did, if I wanted to sell Ruijerd figures I'd already picked a side. I guessed Cliff didn't really want me declaring my team yet, but he'd understand.

The only point that nagged at me was Therese. Therese, the captain of the Blessed Child's guard. She'd saved me ten years ago and again today. This was no way to repay that kindness. *Damn it.*

"Aisha, what do you think?" I asked. Her face was grave, but she looked up when I spoke.

"I think kidnapping the Blessed Child is going too far."

"Right."

"You're always cool and collected, so I feel like... This isn't like you, Big Brother."

Your big brother isn't usually all that cool and collected, I thought. Still, if she felt that way, it proved I *really* wasn't thinking clearly. Right. At times like this, it was easy to make a bad call. *Okay, Rudy, pull yourself together...* I needed to calm down a bit, then I could think.

First, was this part of the Man-God's plan? Right now, that felt like a stretch. My paranoia tended to run wild wherever he was concerned, but the issue at hand was essentially between me and the Latrias. Far as I knew, it was that

simple. It wasn't impossible that he was trying to make me strike against Claire and make an enemy of the cardinalists, but it seemed too convoluted. Besides, I'd always sided with the pope; I disagreed with the cardinal position on plenty of things. Perhaps the Man-God had pushed things in this direction after seeing a future where I joined forces with the cardinal, but then it would make more sense to pit me against the Blessed Child or the cardinal or whoever—someone who'd send me on a more clearly adversarial path than Claire. Though Claire would happily act as an in-between for the cardinal, so...maybe the idea was to make me her enemy and the cardinalist would naturally follow? But even if that were so, I wouldn't find any evidence to prove it.

I was overthinking it.

For now, I'd assume the Man-God wasn't involved and go from there. It wasn't a good idea to make outright enemies of the whole expulsionist faction, at any rate.

"All right. Kidnapping the Blessed Child is too much. Let's forget that idea."

That made it feel way less necessary to jump straight to extreme measures. I had the pope backing me up and even Therese felt warmly about me, judging by today's meeting. If I talked through everything with those two, they might help me. There were other options to try before turning to all-or-nothing strategies. That was my whole reason for going to the church headquarters today. I didn't know what that stubborn old hag wanted, but I doubted she'd immediately push Zenith into the bed of a stranger to clinch things, not in the midst of all this. Besides, after that convoluted kidnapping plot, surely she wouldn't move straight on to such an obvious plan.

"There are tons of people we can ask for help. Let's begin by approaching as many as we can. The Latrias must have a next move planned, after all," I said. The other two looked relieved. I must have sounded sufficiently rational.

"Just in case, though, Geese—I want you to poke around for any information on my mother's whereabouts. I know it won't be easy...so you don't have to do it alone. I can pay."

"Gotcha, Boss."

"And me?" asked Aisha, squeezing my hand. "What should I do?" Perhaps she

felt responsible too. I thought for a moment.

“Okay, you go search the building used by the mercenary company branch.”

“Huh?! You don’t want me to look for Zenith?”

“I want to set up a contact tablet and an emergency teleportation circle. It’d be good to ask Sir Orsted about the Man-God’s involvement here, too.”

“Oh... Right. That’s true. What about after that?”

“You back up Geese in searching for Zenith.”

“Got it!” said Aisha, nodding determinedly. This would be tough for a demon like Geese if he were alone, but paired with Aisha they’d be a force to be reckoned with. I felt reassured that they could track down anything, no matter how obscure.

“One more thing. If it looks like my mother is in real danger, I’ll act first and consequences be damned. You two should be ready to get away from here if it comes to that.”

“Okay.”

“I understand.”

Both of them nodded resolutely.

Right, I thought. Guess I’m going back to the church headquarters tomorrow.

Chapter 2:

A Chess Problem

THE NEXT DAY, I found myself back in a little room cut off from the outside world, squaring off against the pope. Next to him sat Cliff.

“Your Holiness, I hope I find you well,” I said.

Cliff knew what had gone down last night. I told him everything about how Zenith had been taken, and he was outraged on my behalf at the Latrias’ brutish tactics.

“I need the pope’s help,” I told him.

Now I was on my second audience with His Holiness in as many days. The pope had to have other things on his plate, but he’d made time for me.

“You must be tired, Mr. Rudeus.”

“Is it that obvious?” I said.

I touched my face and felt a prickle, even though I’d just shaved. I’d spent all last night replaying my encounter with Claire, too infuriated to sleep. I must have looked awful.

“It is. Am I correct in assuming *that* is why you requested today’s audience?” replied the pope.

He acted like he saw right through me. Maybe he’d already heard of what happened to Zenith.

“The truth is, Your Holiness, my mother was abducted last night.”

“Oh? And by whom?” inquired the pope. His smile never faltered as he watched me.

That phrasing... He knows, I thought. Could it be that the *pope* was pulling the strings from behind the curtain? I hoped not.

“The Latrias,” I answered. I recounted last night’s events.

The pope's eyes narrowed. "And now, you wish for my assistance in your investigations?"

"That about sums it up," I said.

The pope twirled his Santa Claus beard, considering my words. Then he looked at me. His smile remained, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"In that case, I'll need a favor of you."

"Your Holiness?" said Cliff, baffled. "Rudeus is my friend. He isn't here as part of a faction squabble, but for his family. Do you really think it's appropriate to negotiate terms for such a matter?"

"Think carefully, Cliff," replied the pope. His voice was kind but chiding. "This is a Latria family dispute. I can intervene, but that will mean interfering in another family's affairs. I doubt the Latrias will take kindly to the Grimors getting involved. They will, however, hear me out if I come to them in my capacity as pope. This is all between a mother, her daughter, and her grandson, at the end of the day. Also, unless I use that authority, the Grimors would end up owing the Latrias a hefty debt."

So the Latrias will have baited a minnow and caught a whale. From the whale's point of view, the bargain needs a little extra something to be worthwhile.

"What would you have me do, Your Holiness?" I asked.

"Oh, you say that easily enough," said the pope, "but this is all feeling a little too good to be true. The Dragon God's right hand comes to me in distress, seeking aid? What possessed the Latrias to go and make an enemy of you in the first place, hm?"

"...I don't know. Isn't it possible the Latrias don't know who the Dragon God is?" Now I thought about how Claire had treated Aisha or how she'd totally ignored me when we arrived, it seemed obvious that she'd looked down on me from the start. *The Dragon God Orsted?* I imagined her saying. *I've never heard of any such backwater deity.*

"However he might appear, Count Latria keeps himself well informed on what's going on in the world," said the pope. "He wouldn't let anything

concerning a warrior of your caliber slip through his net, and he certainly wouldn't dismiss it."

Count? Not Claire, then, but her husband—Carlisle.

"I...haven't been introduced to the count yet," I replied. "I suspect that Claire, his wife, may be doing this alone. She doesn't know anything."

Even if she did know who I was, different people had different views on who counted as important. I wasn't a noble, nor did I hold an important role in any government. I served under this alleged Dragon God, but while Claire might have heard of the name, she had no idea who he was beyond that. I had some sort of connection with Ariel, but she didn't know how close those ties were. For all she knew, I was just tossing big names around to make myself sound important. It followed, then, that in Claire's world, I hardly held much standing at all.

"Lady Latria has a tendency to put too much weight on titles and blood, it is true. What you say is plausible..." said the pope. He stroked his beard thoughtfully, then gave a slight nod. "Well, why not? No risk, no reward as they say! In which case, Lord Rudeus... What exactly *can* you do for me?"

What can you do for me? Put another way, he was asking: *What are you willing to do for me?* He wanted to know how far my loyalty extended.

"Well..." I began, thinking about my idea from the previous night. The sudden brain wave I'd shut down as too brash. "Kidnapping the Blessed Child would be within my power," I said.

"Kidnapping?!" exclaimed Cliff immediately. "What are you saying, Rudeus?!"

"I'm basically saying I could hit the Demon Expulsionists where it hurts most."

"That's not what I meant! If you kidnap the Blessed Child over this, it could mean the end of the House of Latria! Are you really willing to destroy your own family?!"

I turned slowly to Cliff. "The Latrias?" I said. "They aren't my family."

Cliff looked away, lost for words. The pope's smile stayed in place.

"Of course," I went on, "I only suggested that because it seemed like it might

have value to Your Holiness. I could reduce a whole town to ashes, or clear a forest, if that's what it took."

I only meant it as a flex, showing what I had up my sleeve, but the pope stroked his beard again. *Does it all sound too good to be true?* I wondered. He could easily suspect that someone was setting a trap for him. If he wanted to vet me, that was fine by me. I had nothing to hide. My only agenda was getting Zenith back.

All of a sudden, Cliff cried, "I am against this! Abduction is a crime. The Latrias may be our enemies, but if you talk to them, Grandfather, surely you can work things out!"

The pope didn't reply.

"And you, Rudeus!" Cliff went on. "How can you sink to their level? This isn't like you... Are you sure this isn't just your anger talking?"

My anger? Oh, absolutely. Claire's actions had me seething with rage. I mean, I was furious. It was honestly a miracle I hadn't gone straight to violence. I wouldn't be nearly this angry if Zenith hadn't been involved. I didn't get angry when Eris was injured in the battle with the North Emperor, or when Roxy almost died in the battle with the Death God. Why? Because they'd chosen it themselves. They'd come with me of their own free will, with a full understanding of the risks. If they'd died as a result, I would have been devastated. I'd have honored their choices, full of regret that I'd been too weak to protect them. *I could have prevented this!* I'd have wept.

But right now, Zenith didn't have a choice. She'd neither consented nor refused the invitation in the letter. She was here because of me. And now she might end up married off to a stranger, forced to bear his children. If Zenith had been able to choose, if she had decided to come herself, that would be different. If she'd refused and fought back against Claire only to eventually submit, I could still have let it go. Only to the extent that I wouldn't be angry, but still. I think I'd have been consumed by something else. Something different from anger, the kind of despair that made you want to end it all. A grimy, pathetic sense of self-loathing, that sort of powerlessness. That would have been far harder to bear than anger, but I'd still have let it go.

This, though? I couldn't let this go. I couldn't stand back and let Zenith be treated like an object because she couldn't say "no." Maybe that was why I wanted to inflict that sense of powerlessness on Claire. Maybe what I wanted was to see her hounded and denounced: *It's your fault the Blessed Child was kidnapped! Don't try to deny it!* I wanted her desperate and utterly defeated. I wanted *revenge*.

...Wow, I'm a real bastard.

"There's still time, Rudeus," Cliff pleaded. "Go back and talk to them. I'll even come with you."

"Cliff..."

"Didn't the Latrias do everything they could to help in your search for Zenith? Surely that proves they care about your mother and your sisters. It's still possible this was all a misunderstanding. If you all get together and talk it out, maybe we can get everyone on the same page."

His words tugged at me a bit, but I knew what had happened. Talking's great—when talking could fix things. But the old hag wasn't listening. I was pretty far past reconciliation. Our values and attitudes were too different. It felt like trying to reason with someone in a foreign language. How was I supposed to *talk things out* when we couldn't even understand each other?

All the same, I'd clear my head then think it over again.

"...Maybe you're right," I said.

Claire and I had different values, that was all. Maybe with a third party there to mediate we could reach a solution. It couldn't be the pope though, not with his position; if he mediated, he'd only end up owing the Latrias favors. Cliff wasn't ideal either. He was still a nobody in this country—Claire might not be willing to listen to him. There was, however, someone else I could ask. Someone who could get through to Claire, and who wouldn't get us tangled up in faction rivalries.

Honestly, I should've gone to her first, not the pope.

"I'll ask Therese if she can help... My apologies, Your Holiness. Please forget I mentioned all that about kidnapping."

“Consider it done,” said the pope with a kind smile. “Even among the Temple Knights, Therese is a woman of integrity. I’m sure she will be only too happy to assist you.”

I nodded and Cliff heaved a sigh of relief.

I decided to work on Therese starting the next day. There was just one small problem: Therese was the captain of the Blessed Child’s guards. In the ranks of the Temple Knights, she was a captain in the Shield Company. She spent every day living alongside the Blessed Child, always there to protect her. Ah, what did the Blessed Child do? Not a thing. Like the pope and the others, she was confined to the inner sanctum of the church headquarters. Apparently, she used to get out and about a fair bit, but after a few incidents including an assassination attempt that nearly succeeded, she hadn’t been outside except on church business in a long time. In addition to the large number of temple knights and mages specializing in divine and barrier magic stationed at the church headquarters, there were also around ten guards who were exclusively dedicated to the Blessed Child’s protection. The inner sanctum was one of the most secure locations you could imagine. Therese was always with the Blessed Child, so getting in to see her wasn’t going to be easy. Letters wouldn’t reach her, and even if I went and asked for her directly she wouldn’t come out to see me. It almost made me wish I’d gotten the pope to help me instead.

It wasn’t *impossible*, though.

This was just based on what the pope told me, but it sounded like the Blessed Child didn’t spend every second of every day shut up in her room. Every few days, she was briefly allowed out into the church’s inner garden. Her yard time, so to speak. She went out into the garden, which was open to the general congregation, looked at the flowers and the trees, chatted with her guards, and spoke with the occasional ordinary visitor. Living as she did in her tiny, cloistered world, these short outings were all the Blessed Child had to look forward to.

Those outings were my chance to see Therese.

I couldn’t openly loiter around waiting for her, though. That would arouse

unnecessary suspicion. The Blessed Child was a VIP. It didn't matter if I had business with Therese. If I looked like I was targeting her, I'd end up with the Temple Knights at my neck.

That's why I decided to go to the church gardens pretty much every day. I walked into the church like I belonged there, presenting myself as Cliff's bodyguard before heading to the gardens. I came up with the excuse that I'd taken an interest in the Sarakh Trees. I even took some canvas in so I could sketch them. The sketch wouldn't take a single day, so it gave me a good cover for my always being in the garden.

In the meantime, Geese and Aisha were moving everything else along. Aisha sped around the city like a bullet train hunting for a building to house the mercenary band. Meanwhile, Geese used his contacts to keep watch on the Latria servants. No leads, of course.

The three of us carried on like this until the Blessed Child's day off came around.

"Oh, Sir Rudeus!" she cried as soon as she saw me, running over. "You're back again today! Now you must tell me about Lady Eris, just as you promised!"

I obliged her, recounting what was new with Eris. There were a lot of good stories, and the Blessed Child listened enthusiastically. Her guards kept a wary eye on me. Their job was to keep suspicious persons away from the Blessed Child—to make sure no vermin came sniffing around her. But me? I'm not suspicious, no. Everyone knew that I was a friend of Cliff's and related to Captain Therese.

After I was done talking to the Blessed Child, I went and raised my concerns with Therese.

"Ah, that..." she said. Apparently she'd heard about Zenith's abduction too. She took the matter seriously right away.

"I can hardly believe Mother would do something so barbaric..." she said. "Look, I have a day off soon. I'll go talk to my mother as well. Don't worry, Zenith won't be married off to some strange man in the meantime. I'm sure of it." She put her hand to her breasts (they were just as big as Zenith's) as she made this vow.

I felt like I could trust her.

“The only thing is,” she added, “Mother was dead set against me becoming a knight, so she may not listen to me.”

“So... What do we do if she doesn’t?”

“There are strings I can pull, if it comes to that. I’ll talk to Father, or my older brother. Just leave it to me.”

I *really* felt like I could trust her.

Days passed. Still no sign of Zenith. Geese told me that none of the servants were acting suspiciously. No secret meetings outside the Latria estate nor any outsiders coming in and out of the house. Obviously there was no sign of anyone who looked like Zenith going in or out either. Geese figured that meant Zenith was probably inside the house.

Aisha had successfully set up the new mercenary band office. The building was a former tavern in a corner of the Merchant District. Now she was in the process of stocking up on preserved food and clothing. I set up a contact stone in the basement along with an emergency teleportation circle. The emergency teleportation circle was hooked up to a scroll I kept on me that ran off of magic crystals. It could only be used once. I hoped I wouldn’t need it.

Right off the bat, I used the contact tablet to call Orsted and ask his advice.

“...And now we’re here,” I said, reaching the end of my explanation.

“All right then,” replied Orsted. He proceeded to give me some new information, along with his predictions for the Man-God’s next moves.

First, he told me about the Blessed Child.

The Blessed Child. She had no other name, having forfeited it when she was taken in by the church. From that day on, although everyone bowed down to her in public, in reality she became a tool. The Blessed Child possessed an ability called *memory skimming*. When she looked into a person’s eyes, she could see their memories.

Her job was to carry out inquisitions. She was summoned for both internal

church investigations and public court cases to read the suspect's memories. A word from the Blessed Child was enough to condemn you, even if you were a noble or a bishop who'd pulled off the perfect crime. The ultimate lie detector. The King of Millis himself attested to her powers. She was the entire reason that the cardinal's faction was on the ascendant, while the pope's faction declined.

But memories... She can see memories. Only see them.

A small part of me wondered: What if the Blessed Child could get Zenith's memories back? Orsted said it was probably impossible, given the Blessed Child's powers only extended to seeing. but even so...

If the opportunity arose, I was going to have her try. Unfortunately, non-believers couldn't pop in and borrow the Blessed Child whenever they felt like it. The church, which in reality meant the cardinal, kept tight control on the use of her powers. You had to get his permission. Not just outsiders, everyone—even the royal family or the pope. The Blessed Child was off limits. I might have gotten her to like me a bit, but that didn't mean I could just ask her to swing on by the Latria abode and expose their lies for me.

The other thing about the almighty Blessed Child was that her destiny was extremely fragile. There weren't any time loops where she made it to thirty, and more often than not, she died around the age of ten. Orsted said that, given her destiny and her powers, the chances that she was a disciple of the Man-God were practically nonexistent.

Next up was the House of Latria. There were currently four Latrias who were of age, not including Zenith.

The head of the house, Count Carlisle Latria.

His wife, Countess Claire Latria.

Their eldest son, Temple Knight Edgar Latria.

Their fourth-eldest daughter, Temple Knight Therese Latria.

Their eldest daughter, Anise Latria, had married the Marquess of Berkrant, whose estate was in a town around a day's journey to the west of Millishion. So she wasn't in the city. The same was true of the eldest son, Edgar. He was a junior captain in the Temple Knights, and he was stationed in the same town as

Anise. Their father, Carlisle, was a Temple Knight senior commander. His role kept him extremely busy, and while on duty he almost always stayed at the barracks. He came home perhaps one day in every ten. As I'd concluded from my prior investigation, Therese, as captain of the Blessed Child's guard, stayed at the church. She essentially lived there even when she wasn't on duty. This meant that practically speaking, Claire was the absolute mistress of that manor.

I asked Orsted about Claire too.

Claire Latria was the eldest daughter of the Latria family. Fiercely stubborn from the day she was born, she was raised to be hard on herself and those around her. She never, ever backed down once she made a decision, and apparently would be that way till the day she died. Carlisle had married into her family. They had one son and four daughters. To the best of Orsted's knowledge, she was an unremarkable noblewoman who would never do anything particularly noteworthy, and would pass from the world and leave it tidily, as if she'd never been here. She valued fairness and detested crime. Orsted said she wasn't the type to go around kidnapping people.

Orsted also gave me a detailed rundown on the internal power struggles of the Millis Church. As I already knew, the church was divided between the pope faction and the cardinal faction. The schism between the two occurred around three hundred years ago. Until the schism, the Millis Church had followed the word of scripture, where it was written that "all demons shall be destroyed," and expelled all demonfolk. This was the church's stance until one priest's attention fell on the line "all races are equal under Millis," and argued that "should demons then not also be equal?" thus triggering the schism. The struggle for power between the demon expulsion faction and the demon integration faction had gone on ever since.

This is how things stood now:

The pope's—Cliff's grandfather's—faction supported demon integration. Currently, this faction was the largest. The majority of the common folk of Millis and the Missionary Knights belonged to this faction. Commonly known as the pope's faction, the integration faction, *etc.*

The cardinal faction supported demon expulsion. They controlled the Blessed

Child. The Temple Knights and most of the older noble families like the Latrias were in this faction. Commonly known as the cardinal's faction, the Blessed Child faction, the Demon Expulsionists, *etc.*

The royal family and the Cathedral Knights were neutral. Around forty or fifty years ago, back when the expulsionists were winning, other races in Millishion faced severe prejudice and there had been a lot of fighting with the Great Forest. In the end, though, the integrationists had put an end to a relatively severe bout of fighting with the demonfolk. Their influence had grown, and a cardinal who favored integration had snatched the pope's throne. After that, the integration faction had the power to act however it pleased, but then the Blessed Child had been born and the expulsionists had rallied around her. An expulsionist archbishop was elevated to cardinal, and the balance began to tip back in the expulsionists' favor. That's how we arrived here.

Finally, the Man-God's interference. Orsted said that there was no one of particular importance currently in Millis. With Millis being the country it was, when Laplace began his war, it would never side with the demonfolk regardless of who was in charge. That meant all of these political machinations were a wash to both Orsted and the Man-God.

Of course *my* ideal outcome would have Cliff on the pope's throne. It was possible that the Man-God was orchestrating something to prevent that from happening, but if so, he had a weird way of going about it. Kidnapping Zenith was totally unrelated. No, I didn't have to worry about the Man-God here.

"When in doubt, kill. Your enemy's intentions will die with them," Orsted told me. I felt like I might actually do that.

That was everything from Orsted for now. I probably ought to have gotten up to speed on all that beforehand. That said, the decision to come to Millis *had* been a sudden one, and my plan was to just call in, say hello, and leave. I'd been a bit overly optimistic. When the time came to go to the King Dragon Realm, I'd be more prepared.

A few more days passed, then Therese came back to me with good news.

"She didn't say it out right, but Mother more or less admitted that she's got Zenith!" she announced.

“No way!”

Therese had used one of her rare days off to go and see Claire on my behalf. She'd needled her mother with questions until she managed to get an indirect admission that Claire had ordered a servant to deceive Geese and abduct Zenith, *and* that she was now holding Zenith captive somewhere.

“There's something off about her, though...” Therese said. “Like she's hiding something, or feeling conflicted. I'm sure she doesn't seriously intend to marry my sister off, but even so...”

“Hmm... What about Zenith's location?”

“I'm sorry, but I couldn't pry it out of her,” said Therese, her face clouding over. Her attempts to get the location out of Claire had failed. She'd then tried to persuade her mother to return Zenith to me. *I don't know what you've done with Zenith, but surely you're taking on too much, trying to find a partner for a widow who's lost her mind.*

You probably haven't realized how amazing Rudeus is, but this is a guy who can just pop in and see the pope! You really ought to treat him with more respect.

If he says he'll look after her for as long as he's alive, why not just let him?

But Claire had remained equivocal and refused to give any clear answer.

“In the end, she started asking when I was going to get married...” Therese sighed. “I'm sorry. Whenever that subject comes up, we always end up fighting.”

“Hmmm...”

Geese told me that as far as he could tell nothing had been set in motion since the abduction. Therese said it seemed like Claire was hiding something, or maybe she was conflicted. Orsted himself said kidnapping was way out of character.

Something was definitely up with Claire.

Even if there was, though, so what about her motives? It wasn't like she ever spared a thought for me and my feelings. She acted like I might as well not

exist.

“But hey,” said Therese, piercing through my thoughts, “the House of Latria can’t even find *me* a husband. There’s no way Claire will find someone to marry Zenith just like that.”

“...What? Oh, yeah, you’re right. Definitely.” I didn’t really see what her prospects had to do with Zenith’s, but hey, if she said so.

“Mother is just being stubborn. We’ll attack her from all sides next time. I’ve talked to Father, and asked my brother and sister to come. You wouldn’t think so, but Mother always takes my father’s words to heart. If he and my brother both talk to her, I know she’ll at least listen.”

“You’ve thought of everything... Thank you,” I said.

“Don’t thank me,” she replied. “My mother started all this.”

Therese had done a fantastic job, so much so that I had to wonder what on earth had motivated this level of devotion. I’d only even met her once, maybe twice before...

“If you *do* want to thank me though, you could introduce me to a few Asuran knights, maybe some nobles from there—”

“Therese! Are you finished?” Just as our conversation was wrapping up, the Blessed Child came over. Therese’s demeanor changed in an instant.

“B-Blessed Child! Forgive me, I should not be discussing my personal business while on duty.”

“Think nothing of it! This is for Lady Eris’s husband, after all. I owe her a debt of gratitude, and Saint Millis is always watching.”

Ah, now it made sense. Therese wasn’t helping me for my sake alone, but for Eris, too. This might actually be the first time anyone had thanked me for something Eris had been involved in.

Right, once the kids were a little older I’d bring Eris here.

“Blessed Child, it’s almost time.”

“Let us escort you back to your room.”

“Master Rudeus, keep up the good work!”

The otaku knights' attitude toward me had softened too, lately. When I first showed up, my connections to the pope's faction had gotten all the guards' hackles up, but they didn't get up in my face much these days. They would always be wary, but they seemed to have decided that I was a neutral party. Safe.

I mean, after the effort I put in they'd better think that. I'd gone out of my way to be a total beta male, refusing to speak in an off-puttingly formal fashion due to her status and always making her smile with amusing stories. Spending time with me always put the Blessed Child in a good mood, and I heard she looked forward to my visits even after she was returned to her rooms. I'd worked hard to make that happen. Couldn't hurt that Therese, the captain of her guard, treated me so cordially, either. When the captain herself let her guard down around me, suspicion began to feel stupid and overcautious.

Honestly, they should probably be *more* suspicious. I could have snatched the Blessed Child any time I felt like it. Not that I would. Although, if Therese's efforts at persuasion went nowhere, and I didn't get Zenith back—if I was truly backed into a corner and had no other options left...

Yeah, then I'd do it.

When push came to shove, I'd always put Zenith first. If I didn't, I couldn't face my dead father, or Lilia, who was taking care of a pregnant Sylphie while I was away. That was why I made sure never to meet the Blessed Child's eyes. I knew she could see memories, but not how deep that sight went. Who knows, it might not even extend deep enough to see I was seriously considering grabbing her.

But then again, it *might*. The guaranteed safe option was to make sure I never made eye contact with her. I was pretty sure none of her guards had noticed—even if some of them had, from what I heard everyone tried to avoid the Blessed Child's eyes even within the church. I guess no one liked the idea of someone peeking at their memories. My doing the same wouldn't strike anyone as suspicious.

Abducting her would be easy.

All I had to do was place a teleportation circle scroll under the chair where the Blessed Child always sat. When the time came, I'd distract the guards then activate the scroll to teleport her away. After she disappeared right in front of me, I'd definitely be a suspect. But there'd be no evidence. The ink of the magic circle would vanish, leaving only paper. It wouldn't occur to most people to suspect teleportation.

The teleportation circle would be connected to the mercenary office, which was stocked with food and clothes when we got the band up and running. I'd have Aisha stand guard over the Blessed Child there while I opened negotiations.

I didn't want to use that plan if I could help it, though. I'd feel bad doing that to Therese. She was on my side, she was angry that Claire had been so brutal, and she'd gone as far as to call her siblings back to Millishion from pretty far away. I didn't know how Carlisle, who had to be nearby, felt about all this. But Therese herself was making a genuine effort to make Claire change her mind.

If the Blessed Child were kidnapped, that would be her failure.

"Therese, if it's not too much of a strain on your time, I'd be very grateful if you'd introduce me to Lord Carlisle, and my uncle and aunt as well. I really ought to meet them, and I want to personally request their assistance."

"Oh, of course."

But if that's what it took. If I had to, I'd be ready. If disgracing myself would allow me to keep my promise to Paul and Lilia, I'd do it. But I'd give Therese her shot. If it looked like her efforts weren't going anywhere, maybe I'd give them a shot and grab the Blessed Child after facing the guards in a fair fight. No sneaky tricks.

The total opposite of the plan I'd prepped.

"I wish Mother would put her efforts into finding me someone instead, when Zenith already has a great guy to take care of her..." Therese said with a sigh.

She left, grumbling to herself. I bowed my head to her once more, thinking, *You don't want a guy like me.*

Another few days passed. It was morning. It had been what, fourteen? Maybe fifteen days since I arrived in this country. After Aisha finished setting up the mercenary office and started helping with Geese's investigation, the two of them brought me some new information. Yesterday, a tailor shop worker had visited the Latria estate. Aisha paid someone to bring her the tailor, who in turn revealed that they'd been called in to take a woman's measurements for a bridal gown. The woman was getting on a bit in years for a bride, and her eyes were empty. That was Zenith, beyond a doubt.

More news: Claire's butler had met a few times with someone from the church in secret. The only natural conclusion was that Claire was picking out a husband for Zenith. And if that was the case, we were running out of time.

It wasn't time to panic yet. After receiving Therese's message, the Latrias' eldest son and daughter were on their way. They had sent a letter, Therese told me, in which they said, "to marry off a daughter who cannot even speak for herself is surely impermissible." It was nice to know that my aunt and uncle were decent folks.

I still hadn't laid eyes on Lord Carlisle. He was probably busy with his duties as a military commander. Therese reassured me though, saying that "Father would never condone what Claire has done".

Aisha had fond memories of the head of the House of Latria as well. She told me, "He was always kind to me." What he'd have to say about the business with Zenith I had no idea, but I wanted to talk to him soon. Claire couldn't keep this up if her husband and whole family were against her. She might be in charge of the estate, but she wasn't the head of the house. It didn't matter what she had planned—I had her in check.

I couldn't thank Therese enough for how she'd flown into action to help me. Even if things went wrong, now I knew where Zenith was, and had an idea of how well-equipped Claire was to fight me. If I contacted Therese beforehand, I was pretty sure she'd get me the building layout and tell me where she thought the guards would be, too.

If Carlisle took my side, though, there'd be no need for violence. I'd strong-arm my way to Zenith, give Claire a piece of my mind, and that'd be the end of

it.

Man, what a relief. It really looked like I could wrap this up without it metastasizing beyond myself and the Latrias. That meant I avoided making problems for Cliff *and* I got to build my relationships with the other Latrias. There'd been a few unexpected twists along the way, but everything looked like it would work out. It was a good thing I didn't do anything stupid. Reaching out to the people around me and using them to build bridges was the right call. There'd never been any need to kidnap the Blessed Child. Yep! I hadn't been thinking straight. I only had that crazy idea because I'd wanted a quick solution. But in the end, slow and steady always wins the race. I mean, look at the progress we'd made. Every piece was on the board, and I could see a checkmate in just a few more moves. Maybe I wouldn't be able to get even, but I could let that go if I had Mother back.

Those were the thoughts that ran through my mind as I made my way once again to the garden at the church headquarters. Over the past two weeks or so the Sarakh Trees had lost their flowers, but in my painting they were still in full bloom. My painting's trees sent an eternal spray of pink petals fluttering through the air. It was almost finished.

It sucked pretty hard.

When I started working on it, the Blessed Child's fan brigade had a great time mocking me about it. The moment I added the Blessed Child in her white dress, though, they changed their tune. Suddenly it was a heartbreaking work of staggering genius. These guys weren't hard to read, you get me?

The Blessed Child even asked me to give her the painting when it was finished. I told her that while I was no artist, if she wanted it, it was hers. I was going to secretly make a figure to give her along with it. It occurred to me that I didn't need to stamp out the influence of the Demon Expulsionists and strengthen the voice of the papalist faction—if I could just get the Blessed Child to declare from on high, “I give permission for the sale of figures!” we should be good to go. I wouldn't start selling demon figures right away—we'd introduce new models one by one, then down the line add a demon as part of a series...

Okay, forget it. The Blessed Child probably didn't even have that kind of

authority.

“Wait...”

As I reached the entrance to the garden, something felt off. There was someone here.

“They’re here already?” I wondered aloud. Every time up till now, a few guards came out to patrol after I arrived, and then the Blessed Child came out. At this time of day, I should have been the only one here. Maybe the patrol had started already. Or maybe it was someone else. I stepped out into the garden.

There was no one there. The aura I’d felt was probably just my imagination. I mean, it wasn’t like I had laser-point eyes like Ruijerd’s.

“Huh?”

I noticed one item I didn’t recognize. On top of my easel, there was a lit candle. Just the one, all by itself. The flame shivered in the sunlight. When I approached, I saw footprints on the ground. One set. They led away under the Sarakh Trees. Was someone hiding back there, behind the tree trunks?

“Therese...?” I called out hesitantly.

No answer. *Ohh, that’s weird.* As I called out, I opened my Eye of Foresight.

“Who’s there?!” I tried again, putting a bit more force into my voice. Meanwhile, I activated my Magic Armor.

I was ready for battle. I approached the Sarakh Trees, staying alert to any movement around me. I didn’t need them to come out—I’d keep my distance, then hit them with magic in their blind spot. The Blessed Child liked that tree, so I’d better be careful not to damage it. Wind magic would do the trick. Whoever strikes first wins.

“What the—?” The magic in my hand dispersed. By the time I managed to think, *That’s weird*, it was already too late. I tried to step back, and came straight into contact with a wall. I turned, but there was nothing there. No, the wall was there, but invisible.

I looked down at my feet. There, shining faintly blue in the morning light, was a magic circle.

“Barrier magic...” I muttered. I’d seen this barrier magic before. If I tried to step out of the magic circle, I’d be blocked by an invisible wall, and any magic I tried to use while inside would be dispelled. I’d seen this before.

“It’s a King-tier barrier, Rudeus,” said a voice from behind the tree. A figure walked slowly out of the shadows. A woman, clad in blue plate armor. Her face, had it not been hidden under that blocky helmet, would have looked just like Zenith’s. And she hadn’t come alone. Men in armor emerged, one from behind a tree, another from out of a cluster of bushes. It was the otaku, always hanging around their princess. Otherwise known as the Temple Knights.

I mean, I was pretty sure it was, but they were all wearing weird helmets so it was hard to say.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “but I got a tip-off that you’re planning to kidnap the Blessed Child.” I stared at her. I didn’t know what to say. The knights spread out to stand in a circle around the barrier. Therese, the only one out in the open, faced me directly.

“You are accused of heresy. Your inquisition begins now,” she said. As one, the helmeted men drew their swords and beat them on the ground. An odd, grating clang rang through the garden.

Chapter 3:

Flip the Board and Take the King

OH, HI! Rudeus Greyrat here. You might be wondering how this happened. There I was, surrounded. Eight upstanding knights all in gleaming blue armor on all sides.

But before we get to that, let's get to know our contestants.

First off, the one right in front of me was Therese. Therese Latria. That's right, my aunt, and a member of the House of Latria. She's a bit of an odd one out amongst the expulsionist Temple Knights. She accepted me, even with all my demon friends, but it went further than that. She didn't really seem to care much at all about race or blood.

She was usually pretty laid-back around me, but this time? Well, she was wearing a helmet, so who's to say?

Let's go around clockwise. Next up was the knight on her left.

He wore a helmet shaped like a skull, and there was a scratch on his armor near his heart. I remembered that mark. I didn't know his real name, but this had to be the knight known as Skull Ash. Given the skull helmet, pretty good guess.

The guy next to him wore a helmet shaped like the trash cans on Millis street corners. He was the only one of the eight wearing a red cape. The Blessed Child really liked that cape. She was always wiping her grimy little hands on it. He had the truly unfortunate appellation Dust Bin.

Next, a helmet with a flat face-plate, engraved all over with the phrase *may you rest in peace*. This guy was over two meters tall. He lifted the Blessed Child up onto his shoulders so that she could pick fruit from the trees. She called him Grave Keeper.

The fourth man's helmet looked like he'd stuck a broomstick on his head. His armor didn't have any particular identifying marks. Okay, brooms...cleaning...

Ah! Trash Sweeper.

There were three more, but to be honest I couldn't tell them apart. They all had names to do with death or graves or whatever and got all swelled up with pride every time the Blessed Child called on them, but as for personal identities, *names...*

They were all cringey, edgelord code names. I remembered that much.

Ah, that's right. Black Coffin, Burial Shroud, and Funeral Procession. Pretty sure that was it. Now what was the whole team called? Wait, it'll come to me... Um...

"Let the inquisition begin! I am Therese Latria, captain of the Keepers of Anastasia, and I shall serve as inquisitor!"

The other seven knights around me shouted their assent, beating their swords on the ground again.

Right, Keepers of Anastasia, that was it. Therese had told me once before.

"I shall now commence the interrogation of the accused! Any objections?"

"No objections!"

"Objection! I move that he be executed on the spot!"

"No objections!"

"No objections!"

"No objections!"

"No objections!"

"No objections!"

"All objections are overruled!"

Aw, poor widdle Dusty's all disappointed. But I mean, when everyone else is like, let's find out more first and you're like, nah let's just do it, you're gonna get overruled... I'll remember that, though, buddy. Don't you worry.

"Rudeus Greyrat stands accused."

Wait, wait. I'm not following this. Can someone catch me up on what

happened last time?

I gotcha! llliiit's recap time!

Our hero Rudeus, trying to rescue his mother, Zenith, went and hung out around the Blessed Child and the captain of her guard, Therese. Then one day, he went to the church headquarters to see Therese, only to find himself trapped inside a King-tier barrier. His captors told him he stood accused of heresy for plotting to kidnap the Blessed Child.

And now I'm all caught up. Don't I feel better.

Like, okay. I admit I had, *at one time*, thought about doing some light kidnapping. But I ditched that plan! Instead, I got Therese on my side and had her negotiate Zenith's return for me. There had to be some mistake. Either that or someone was spreading false information. I'd kept that kidnapping plan close to the vest. Aisha, Geese, Cliff...oh, and the pope. The pope was the most suspicious one on that list, though it was also possible Geese had been captured and they'd tortured it out of him...oh. I hoped Aisha was okay.

"The inquisition shall now begin! Answer truthfully, Rudeus."

"...Got it."

I didn't understand one bit of what was going on. When that happened, the most important thing to do was to stay calm. If I flew off the handle now, everything I'd worked for so far would be for nothing.

"Rudeus Greyrat. Do you admit that you handed out writings denying that demons are evil to lead the hearts of believers astray?" Therese asked.

So they'd done their homework. But then, the pope knew about that, so it was probably in their database.

"I do not," I said.

"Please answer truthfully. We have evidence."

"I didn't 'hand out' anything. I made sure everyone paid me."

"Was the price you asked not remarkably low for a book?"

Damn right it was. I wanted to get that book in the hands of as many people

as possible.

“As you’re well aware, Therese, I—”

“The accused shall not speak except to answer the inquisitor’s questions.”

Don’t be like that. Ask me why I was sucking up to Ruijerd, I thought. But Therese was asking questions she knew the answer to. I’d told her about it before.

“Rudeus Greyrat, you worship the demons and hold them up as gods, do you not?”

I was silent for a moment.

Okay, this one I can definitely deny.

“No, I don’t believe in gods.”

“Liar!” The other knights all roared at me.

“The accused is lying!”

“Lies!”

“All lies!”

“Liar!”

“I judge the accused to be lying!”

“Yeah, lies!”

When they were done, Therese announced, “The majority has decided that you are lying.” And so it was decided.

Majority rule, huh. How very democratic of them. All right. I guess that’s how inquisitions work.

“This is the final question. Rudeus Greyrat, do you admit that you plotted to kidnap the Blessed Child, the symbol of the Holy Millis Church?”

“I do not. I did make a bad joke along those lines once, but I never plotted anything.”

Not that it was a joke when I first blurted it out...but I never acted on it. In the end it might as well have been a joke.

“Liar!”

“The accused is lying!”

“Lies!”

“All lies!”

“Liar”

“I judge the accused to be lying!”

“Yeah, lies!”

Oh, good. I was starting to find the whole thing kind of funny. I wanted to do an inquisition where no one was allowed to laugh. You replied to basic questions with obvious lies, and whoever laughed first got slimed.

That was really the last question, huh...

“The majority has decided that you are lying,” Therese intoned solemnly. The other seven knights beat their swords on the ground again. It was pretty intimidating. If I hadn’t spent the past month looking at what lay behind those helmets, I might’ve been freaked out.

“This inquisition finds Rudeus Greyrat guilty of heresy!”

“No objection!”

“No objection!”

“No objection!”

“Objection! I can’t be here chin-wagging with you fellows when there’s rice to be reaping! Hold it! Take that!”

“...No objection!”

“No objection!”

“No objection!”

“No objection!”

Piping up in the middle got me a good glare.

Sorry, it was your turn, wasn't it?

"This concludes the inquisition. I sentence the defendant to *full disarmament!*"

"What's that? Some kind of death penalty?" I asked. I didn't expect an answer but figured I'd try anyway.

"No, we won't kill you," said Therese. "Your arms will be cut off. Then, to ensure you never wield magic ever again, they will be wrapped in a cloth woven through with barrier magic, then sealed up with earth magic."

Huh, she actually answered. Not sure how you're gonna make that happen, though, when neither of us can get at the other right now...

They had sealed me in. They probably had all kinds of stuff prepared for when the barrier came down and the fight started.

Disarmament, though, really? They were going to chop off my arms, seal them in a barrier, then encase them in concrete as well so I could never use them again. No more magic, no more swords, no more arms... Hence the name. No more fondling breasts for me, either. I'd have to go back to a prosthesis. The Zaliff Prosthesis had decent sensory input, but they were less than ideal for the partner on the receiving end. As you might imagine, hands are no good unless they're warm and soft.

"Therese, you'd take away my joy in life?"

"Murder is your *joy in life?*"

Ugh... Is that what she thinks of me...? That if I've both hands free, I'll go off killing people? It was actually the opposite: I liked *making* people.

"What? No. I meant: without my hands, how am I supposed to hold my wife?"

"Excuse me?"

"I, um... I want to, um, hold my wife again," I said. After being forced to repeat the same mortifying statement twice, all I got for it was an impatient click of the tongue from Therese. *Rude...*

Well, whatever. I wasn't keen to get into a "*Hold your wife? What do you mean?*" "*Let me show you~*" ero-doujin type scene.

"No matter what happens, you guys don't plan on letting me go, do you?"

"That is correct."

"So that joke of a trial wasn't just you messing around—it was the real deal?"

"That is correct."

"The Blessed Child would be able to confirm my innocence, if you called her," I said. "Doesn't the Blessed Child usually attend inquisitions?"

"Provided at least seven are present, the Temple Knights have the authority to pass judgment on heretics in basic inquisitions."

"So you're not going to call the Blessed Child for me."

"That...is correct," Therese said. I couldn't see her face behind her helmet, but her voice shook slightly. So she wasn't doing this because she wanted to—she was an unwilling participant.

"Was everything kind you did for me up till now just an act to get me here?" I asked.

"Of course not. The Blessed Child and I were very fond of you. *You* are the one who betrayed us, Rudeus."

"I didn't betray anyone. I came to you because I trusted you, Therese," I said, then looked around to address all the assembled knights. "I came here wishing only to befriend your beloved Blessed Child."

No one replied. I guess they weren't interested in what I had to say.

Man... This really, really sucks.

I'd really tried to put everything out in the open this time. I'd controlled my impatience, kept all my desires in check, and opted for the slow but sure path to securing Zenith's return. And yet here I was.

"Therese, what's going to happen to Zenith?"

"I...I'll make sure that Mother is persuaded. The matter at hand has no bearing on any of that."

Hmm. That answer, after that tremor in her voice earlier. Therese definitely isn't calling all the shots here. Is it the pope who's behind this? Or the cardinal?

That's the downside of being a servant of the church, huh.

"I know I'm not of the Millis faith, and I do have ties to the pope..." I began, "but you all knew that from the beginning, didn't you? Why *now*—"

"Are you done asking questions?" Therese cut me off with an air of finality.

Her voice was cold. She wasn't going to answer me. I guess this was never supposed to be a back-and-forth.

"One last question: the tip-off you received wasn't from a god that came into your dreams with a message, was it?" I asked.

"No. A trusted source passed it on to me. The Temple Knights would never give credence to the words of an unknown entity like that."

"Even if the god in your dream claimed to be Saint Millis?" I said.

No sooner had I spoken than the knights around me erupted in protest.

"Saint Millis would never send such messages!"

"God would never do such a thing."

"His words are not for our unworthy ears, at any rate!"

"Exactly! Saint Millis would never appear to one other than the Blessed Child!"

"Millis is the one true god!"

"Only a demon would use God's name falsely!"

Therese let the others finish. Then, standing up straight, she said proudly, "Well spoken, all of you. Our faith is absolute, Rudeus."

"...Well, that is a relief," I replied.

I wouldn't find any disciples of the Man-God amongst this merry band of fanatics. They were all devout followers of Millis. That was all I needed to know to put my mind at ease.

I spread my arms out, letting my robe fall to the ground. It made a pretty sick

swooshing sound, if I do say so myself. On my left hand I had the gear I kept on me for these moments.

“Arm, absorb,” I said. The stone of absorption activated, and the barrier at my feet vanished. The Temple Knights’ eyes went wide.

“All right. Let’s see what you’ve got,” I said.

“All units spread out!” Therese shouted. The other Temple Knights sprang away to put distance between us. In response, I sidestepped, creating Stone Cannons in both my hands as I did so. They were pretty fast, and they hit hard enough for a direct hit in the right place to be fatal. I fired. Who was my first target?

Dust Bin, I choose you!

“Support!” he shouted.

“Ngh!”

The two knights standing beside Dust dived out in front to deflect my two Stone Canons. They both carried shields that looked like semi-transparent membranes—Beginner-tier Magic Shields.

Wait, Beginner? My Stone Cannon really got stopped by novice magic?

“Dust, Grave, and Skull, flank from the right! Trash, Coffin, Burial, left! Funeral, attack at will with me!” Therese ordered, and three coordinated magical strikes came at me from both sides. Fire. Water. Earth. Three different magic disciplines at the same time... That wouldn’t help them, though.

“Arm, Absorb!” I said.

The stone of absorption disintegrated their magic, as I fired off another Stone Cannon back at them. It was deflected again, this time by the jerk with the Magic Shield who hadn’t joined in the attack.

“Let this smoldering flame burn bright with your blessing! Flamethrower!”

“Majestic blade of ice, I summon thee to strike my enemy down! Icicle Blade!”

Magic assailed me from both sides at once. Fire and water. Wait! That one

had his hand on the ground. There were three types. It was an Earth Lance!

“Arm, absorb!” The fire and water disintegrated, while the Earth Lance was overwritten by Quagmire at its origin point, rendering it useless.

Crap, I was too slow to get a counter off.

I could move, though. I quickly stepped back to dodge out of the way of the magical attacks.

One kind of magic. Fire. From the size, maybe Fireball?

Why was it just the one? There were three guys over there. Why not three attacks? There was no time to think much about it. I pointed one arm at the left group and the other at the right and shouted, “Stone Cannon!”

Stepping back meant I had a good view of the situation. The Temple Knights had split into groups, with three on the right and three on the left. Two members of each group held a semi-transparent shield—they jumped out in front of my Stone Cannons. And blocked them. I’d made the Cannons harder and faster this time, but they still bounced off the shields like they were nothing. I’d seen this before: Water God Style. Impressive that it even worked with Magic Shields.

“Unknown God, answer my call and raise the earth up toward the heavens! Earth Lance!”

“O spirits of the magnificent waters, I beseech the Prince of Thunder! With your majestic blade of ice, slay my enemy! Icicle Blast!”

The two without shields sent magic at me, one slightly slower than the other. I could obviously counter both, but it wouldn’t get me anywhere.

Right, what’s the plan?

Three enemies on my right, three on my left. Two in each group were using barrier magic to block my attacks. I could only make two magical attacks at once, so they only needed two shields. When a magical attack came their way, the third member responded with magic of their own. As soon as the other team realized they weren’t targets, they dropped their shields. Then, with my defenses left wide open, all three of them attacked at once. They probably used

three magic disciplines because they knew I could only use two. Too bad their information hadn't accounted for the fact that I could neutralize all of their attacks simultaneously. The reason they'd only attacked from one side at the start was a mere matter of distance, I bet. If I'd been nearer, they could have engaged me at close range, then struck whenever I began an incantation. Each group had a member without a shield. I assumed they were in charge of close-range combat.

So long as I was in this safe zone, however, they wouldn't move.

...They really thought this through. Okay, how do you like this?

"Fireball!" I shouted, making sure they all heard it as I summoned my magic. I created two burning orbs, each two meters across. Their size and temperature were Advanced-level, but they were slower than the Stone Cannons. So slow, it'd look like an eephus pitch. High arc, very slow speed. I released one at each group.

"Support!" came the call, and the shield-bearing knights moved out in front. But Magic Shield had a weak point.

"*Disturb Magic!*" I called. The spell wiped out the shields of both the knights on the left.

Almost all barrier magic eats up magical energy so long as it stays active. Even a Beginner-tier magic barrier. What that meant here was that Disturb Magic still worked, even though the incantation was finished. The group on the right would block it, but hey. Divide and conquer.

That was my thought until the instant before something came hurtling at me from behind. I whirled around with my right hand raised to block it. There was a loud thud, and something exploded into dust in front of me. A brown boulder, reduced to fragments that now flew past my face. I could still feel the force of the impact in my elbow. That was a Stone Cannon. I think it was the first time I'd had it used against me.

"Rudeus can cast a different spell with each hand!" Therese called. "So long as two of you counter him and one attacks, we'll be fine! Every one of you, stand your ground!"

She had snuck up behind me, along with one other knight—the one who'd cast the spell.

I was totally surrounded. Had moving back at the start been a mistake? No, I had to assume they had a plan for close range, too.

The armor of the knights I'd hit with Fireball was smoking a bit, but they were otherwise unharmed.

"Rudeus, the eight of us are the strongest of all the Temple Knights," Therese said. "You can't win."

"You think so, do you?" I retorted.

"I do. Over the past ten days, we took the liberty of studying how you fight. You're so famous, it didn't take long to put together a counterstrategy."

Oh? In that case, why don't you have your swords out? I'm weaker at close range.

Right now they were evading all my magic. I had plenty of tricks left up my sleeves, of course. It was possible they hadn't braved close combat because they were wary of what I'd do. Given how they'd shut me out, it *did* look like their strategy was working for them. If they had to resort to a war of attrition, well, it didn't speak highly of their research skills. But they'd gotten behind me.

They must have a plan, which meant I had to act quick.

"Please, Rudeus," Therese called out to me again, "give yourself up! Before you try anything—we know you favor magic, and we have a plan to shut you down! I wasn't expecting that device on your left hand, but I know how it works now!"

"Oh?"

"The entrance to the garden is sealed with barrier magic! No one's coming to help you!"

Huh. Kudos, guys. This plan was pretty perfect. They'd worked out a foolproof strategy to catch me. No heat-of-the-moment counter-plan was going to break through that. It was thorough.

I wondered if I should try a few different approaches and see if I couldn't

break out. But if it got me captured, it'd be absolutely mortifying. I couldn't afford to pull my punches anymore.

"Quagmire," I said. It was time to get serious.

Therese

RUDEUS MUTTERED something and the ground beneath my feet turned to mud. My informant had told me about this spell. This was why they called him Rudeus "Quagmire" Greyrat.

The swamp the spell created should only have been about the size of a dinner plate. As was to be expected from *the* Quagmire, however, this one was much bigger. Every visible inch of the garden was transformed into a muddy bog. There was a nasty squelching sound as the Blessed Child's treasured Sarakh Trees, the Balta Trees, and the Peeris Trees all listed sideways. The quagmire wasn't going to hold us back; Trash was already chanting the counter spell.

"Deep Mist," Rudeus murmured. A moment later, everything was obscured by white mist.

Oh, crap.

"Everyone on your guard! He wants us stuck in the mud and lost in the mist so he can pick us off one by one!" I shouted. The next instant, the ground glowed purple, followed by a sharp crack like something splitting apart. My ears rang.

"No one panic! The enchantment on your armor makes you immune to Electric!" I called out. "This guy's slippery—don't give him any opportunity to escape!"

I heard someone say, "Understood, captain!" from the mist.

Everything was going to be fine. My informant told me that Rudeus was no good at close range. He did, however, have spells like Electric and Stone Cannon and a number of others we had to watch out for. All his magic was powerful to boot. I didn't want to be on the receiving end of a direct hit.

Unfortunately for Rudeus, however, every knight in the Keepers of Anastasia was a warrior priest of the highest caliber. At minimum, they were Advanced-level with a blade. They were also trained in Barrier magic, plus four other disciplines at Advanced-level. Any one of them was a formidable opponent taken alone, but they'd also drilled extensively for subduing lone enemies as a team. My Water God Style was only Intermediate-level, but Funeral Procession, waiting beside me, was a Water Saint. Rudeus might be an Imperial-tier magician, but he wouldn't find it easy to get through the ring we'd drawn around him. My strategy was sound.

"We're going to counter the Quagmire, Captain!" said Funeral. A moment later I heard Trash say, "Sand Wave!" The mud beneath us turned to sand, and I yanked my feet out to avoid being buried in it.

Sorry Rudeus, but Sand Wave can overwrite Quagmire. I bet they didn't teach you that at the academy. Countering combined magic is still an ongoing topic of research, after all... This'll be the first time you've had Quagmire cleanly countered, right? Whatever you had planned, it's over. This is checkmate.

None of us really believe that you were going to try and kidnap the Blessed Child, of course. You really made her smile. And I know you only came to me because you were genuinely scared for Zenith. Unfortunately, my hands are tied. This was an order from the cardinal, so truth doesn't come into it—I simply obey.

Well, Dust alone did get a bit huffy, saying he knew you were in love with the Blessed Child all along...

I argued to spare your life, at least. And it worked. The Cardinal generously decreed that as an enemy of Lord Millis, losing your arms would suffice as punishment. That's why we brought no blades or poison.

It's going to be okay, Rudeus. You're so young, and yet you already have a beautiful wife! Even without your arms, you'll be able to live your life with Lady Eris's support. I heard you serve the Dragon God, too. When I was a child, I heard that dragons have mysterious powers, so perhaps they could break our seal and reattach your arms. So long as we don't hear about it, I promise we won't bother you.

As for Zenith...I'll make sure that works out. Like I said, this has no bearing on that.

“We’re going to counter Deep Mist, Captain,” said Funeral, snapping me back to reality. Then, all of a sudden, I got a strange feeling. Something was wrong. But what?

Rudeus...wasn’t doing anything. That was it. After casting Deep Mist, Rudeus hadn’t moved an inch. If he’d run, or used magic, I would have heard something. In the depths of the mist, where I couldn’t even see a meter in front of my face, I didn’t hear a thing. Nothing, not since that first Electric. Could he have gotten away? The Quagmire and Deep Mist, followed by Electric, were the groundwork to keep us from moving, then he’d used some other magic, and he was already—

“Wind Blast!” The wind spell went off, and the mist instantly dispersed.

“Huh?”

All of us stared, unable to believe our eyes.

When the mist cleared, what we saw standing in the middle of our ring was not Rudeus. The thing, whatever it was, stood on top of a torn scroll. It was big and made of rock.

A figurine? A set of armor?

An idea suddenly occurred to me and I murmured, “Was that...summoning magic?” The next moment, the giant suit of armor moved. With terrifying, unbelievable speed.

Rudeus

I WALLOPED Dust’s gang first. I closed in on them the moment the mist cleared. They were too surprised to react in time. Using my Eye of Foresight, I read the positions of their shields and where they’d move while firing off one,

two, three shots.

I think they tried to defend themselves, but all my shots blasted straight through.

I held back, obviously. I only knocked them out. They were alive. Probably.

Without waiting for them to hit the ground, I went into gatling mode. I spun around to my right, my arms spinning around with me. There was a buzzing like angry bees as a line of stone cannons strafed out. The knights' legs snapped like twigs, armored leg guards and all. They were still attached, though, and I hadn't hit any vital spots, so hey, probably not dead. If they got up I'd be in trouble, so I shot each one in the head with a stone cannon to knock them out. Two to go.

I turned, using the footwork Orsted taught me that allowed me to close in on would-be attackers from behind while maintaining the ability to dodge. It didn't seem like anyone was attacking me just then, but better safe than sorry. I stopped in front of Therese. She stared at me in blank shock. Another knight tried to draw his sword to defend her. Too slow, buddy. Way too slow. Eris could have cut him to pieces ten times over in that time.

In the Version One, I could deal with that. My fist whammed into him before he'd drawn the blade out of the scabbard. This last dude didn't have time to speak before I sent him flying. He crashed into the wall of the church and passed out.

Therese stood there looking dazed throughout all of it. I couldn't see her face through the helmet, but I recognized that body language. People panic and freeze up like that when they can't process what's happening anymore.

"Wha...what the...?" she gaped.

I knocked her out. As a gesture of respect for everything she'd done for me, I did it with a Stone Cannon rather than my fist.

It was over.

The Magic Armor Version One was a serious force to be reckoned with. All my attacks had cut straight through their defenses, and I'd barely taken a single hit. Fighting like this almost felt kind of unsporting. The other Temple Knights lay collapsed around Therese and me. None of them were dead. Great, I didn't like

killing people when I could avoid it, unless they were disciples of the Man-God. That was my rule. Besides, these guys were never much of a threat.

“Whew...that feels better.”

Amazing how good it felt to vent some of the frustration I’d built up lately.

Maybe it was good for me to get into a real fight every now and then. I wondered if I should take a leaf out of Eris’s book and... Never mind. That’d be too much violence.

Now *what do I do?* I wondered. After this, the Temple Knights and I were definitely enemies.

Who’d ratted me out in the first place? The list of people who knew about the kidnapping idea included me, Geese, and Aisha...and then Cliff and the pope. Maybe the girl at Cliff’s place as well? I ruled Aisha out right away. If she wanted to betray me, she could have hit me closer to home.

“Big Brother, piggyback!” she’d say, all cute, then while I was distracted by her breasts pressed up against my back, she’d slit my throat. Simpler still, she could poison my drink. “Big Brother, I made this especially for you,” would be all she’d have to say, and I’d be toast. I was pretty sure Geese and Cliff were safe too. I categorized them together. Neither of them needed a big complicated plan to get the better of me.

That left the pope. But why would the pope pick this moment to get rid of me? What was in it for him? No, I was looking at this the wrong way. Maybe he just wanted to pit me against the Temple Knights. Looking at it from his perspective, I’d said I’d support him, but I hadn’t actually followed through. Maybe he plotted this because he was sick of me popping in all the time. Then, while her guards were out here occupied with me, the pope’s people snuck in and kidnapped the Blessed Child themselves...

Wait, wait. Hadn’t Therese said her information came from a trustworthy source? The pope was her enemy—definitely *not* a trustworthy source. The kidnapping line might have been a coincidence, a lie someone had made up then tried to pin on me.

No, wait. Not a coincidence—this could be the Man-God’s plot. His disciples

could be lurking somewhere in the shadows right now. Yeah, that was a more straightforward explanation than betrayal, and it was more likely. Hell if I knew what his angle was, and anyway, it'd be based on whatever he saw in the future. The bastard had his tentacles in every nasty thing that ever happened.

I couldn't pin down the culprit with only the information I had. I was just wasting my time overthinking it. I had a more immediate problem—as of right now, I was accumulating enemies. I didn't know if anything had happened to the Blessed Child, but I'd really done a number on her guards. The cardinalist faction wasn't gonna like it. First, they'd arrest me for the attempted kidnapping of the Blessed Child. Then they'd follow the trail of breadcrumbs to get Cliff, the one who'd brought me to Millishion, and then they'd go for the pope.

Hold on. Didn't that mean the pope hadn't orchestrated this? *Was* it the cardinal?

Come on, we've been over this. Quit worrying about who's behind this and plan your next move.

But against what? Who? Part of me wanted to pack everyone up and get the hell out of the city. But I had Zenith to consider. No way was I leaving her behind. I could go to the Latria estate right now and bust her out...but what if she wasn't there? What if, while I was busy working with Therese, Claire had moved Zenith to a new location?

Was I going to end up burning the whole of Millis to the ground fighting these knights? Oh, the Man-God would love that.

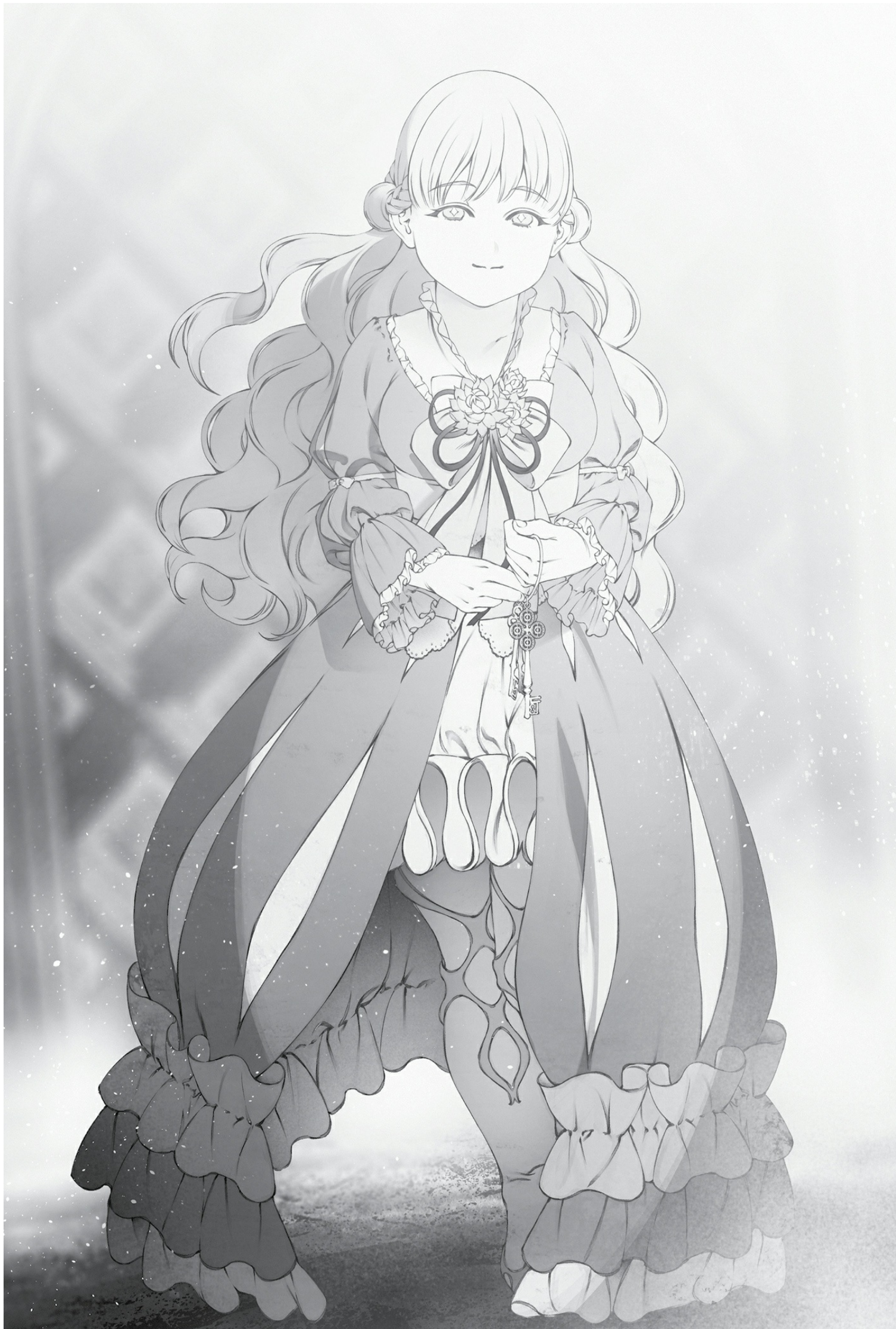
But what the hell. Maybe I should do it anyway. First order of business: get Aisha, Geese and Cliff out of harm's way. Then I'd go to the Latria estate and retrieve Zenith. If she wasn't there, I'd head for the castle, grab a member of the royal family, and demand an exchange of hostages. There, cool, done. I was so *tired* of thinking about this.

"Oh," came a voice. I looked over, past the mess Quagmire had made of the garden, to the door to the inner sanctum. In front of the door, holding the special key that operated its lock, stood a girl. She was alone.

I realized she was looking into my eyes. I immediately tried to avert my gaze,

but it was too late. A look of perfect understanding washed over her face, and she smiled. Then she held her arms out to me, as though welcoming me. When I saw it, it clicked. Maybe it was just an instinct, but I acted on it.

I kidnapped the Blessed Child.



Chapter 4:

Hardball Negotiations

THERE'S AN OLD SAYING: "When you swallow poison, don't forget the plate." In other words, if you've been poisoned you might as well eat the plate that came with it. This proverb was from an era where it was normal to use hard bread in place of a plate. You put meat—or whatever the main dish was—on top to give it flavor, then tore it up and dipped it in soup to soften it before you ate it. "Don't forget the plate," therefore, meant "finish your meal." Eat everything you're given, even if it's poison. Everything's a gift.

Yeah, I'm just bullshitting.

What it *actually* means is if you're going to die anyway, you might as well get a little adventurous. It's quite a positive message. You usually don't eat *plates*, after all. The idea is that if the poison kills you or the porcelain shredding your stomach does it, it's the same difference. Might as well live a little.

I made that up too, obviously.

Anyway! At that moment, I was in the building Aisha had set up as the mercenary office. It was in the Merchant District, underneath a closed-down bar. I was surrounded by barrels of preserved food and rows of black coats yet to be processed. The teleportation scroll had brought me here—a bidirectional teleportation circle I'd set up just in case something like this happened.

Sitting in front of me was a woman. She always put on a cutesy little girl act, but in reality she was probably over twenty years old.

"This place has a lot of character, doesn't it?" remarked the Blessed Child. She sat with her knees bent and her feet to her sides, right down on the dusty floor, even though I hadn't bound her hands or feet or anything. I'd taken her from the garden to here.

"What were you thinking?" I asked.

"Whatever do you mean?"

“Appearing at that critical moment, then not even trying to run away...” When I thought about it, the timing of her entrance had been perfect. It was like she’d been lying in wait so that she could politely cooperate with my kidnapping scheme.

“I happened to step out then, that’s all,” she replied. “No one told me about that terrible fight... When I came out and everything was all covered in mist it gave me quite the scare.”

You made up your mind pretty quick for someone who happened to step out then.

“You’re lying.”

“Oh, yes. The truth is, I looked into the memories of one of my minders and learned what Therese and the others were going to do to you. That’s why I came outside.”

“Huh... You were coming to rescue me?”

“That’s right. Then when I came out and looked into your eyes, I knew what had happened right away.”

The moment she made eye contact with someone, she could see their memories. It was impressive that she’d found my eyes through the Magic Armor, but maybe that was a part of the power. It wasn’t like I understood Zanoba’s uncanny ability, either.

“I am on your side,” she said. “I want to help you.”

I didn’t reply. Instead, I pointed a finger at her.

When you swallow poison, don’t forget the plate. I’d already kidnapped her, so I was already screwed. No more plans. We’re doing this.

I had two cards left to play. Myself and this girl. Let’s imagine the worst-case scenario.

The pope, the cardinal, Therese, and Claire were all my enemies. Working as agents of the Man-God, they’d already taken Cliff, Aisha, and Geese prisoner. In the half-hour or so since I took the Blessed Child, the Temple Knights were already moving. My assumption that no one had seen me teleport was wrong—

someone *had* seen me—and the Temple Knights were headed here now. I hadn't had time to set up a transport circle for the Magic Armor Version One, so I'd cast Quagmire to bury it in the garden for the time being, but the Temple Knights had already dug it out and carted it away.

That would be about as bad as it could get. Bad enough that if things actually turned out that way, I'd be screwed... I had to find a way out of it with just two cards—my own fighting abilities and the Blessed Child.

"Blessed Child," I said, "before I trust you, I have some questions."

"Naturally," she replied.

If I was going to make this work, I needed to question the Blessed Child. I could decide whether I could rely on her later—right now, I needed information.

"What is your power as a Blessed Child?"

"Don't you already know?"

"I want to hear it from you."

She might tell me something different from Orsted. I wanted to check.

"I can see the surface of people's memories."

"The surface?"

"Yes. Things that are on their mind, and the associated memories. Only a little, though."

"What's the difference between that and reading minds?"

"The difference is that I only see the past. Though if I maintain eye contact, I can go back as far as their memories extend."

So it's less that she sees into their memories than that she sees bits of their past that relate to whatever they're thinking about.

"You only see it?" I confirmed.

"That is correct."

"Say a person lost their mind. Could you bring them back to themselves?"

“No. I imagine it could be possible if I used my powers in conjunction with healing magic, though.”

She can't bring Zenith back.

“Meaning...you can't actually read minds.”

“No, but I can use what I see to guess,” she said. She couldn't see what I was thinking right now, but it was impossible to carry on a conversation while constantly thinking about something else. If someone asks you, “What did you have for breakfast?” you're not going to have scientific musings about why the sky is blue at the front of your mind.

“I see why no one with a guilty conscience wants to meet your eyes,” I said. She was a lie detector through and through. All she had to say was that your eyes had met, and that was enough to establish guilt. There was no way to tell if she herself was lying, but I guess nobody watches the watchmen. She could condemn anyone she didn't like; that was how it worked for a Blessed Child. You only had to look at Zanoba to see how this kind of power made you an asset and an incredible threat. So long as someone with power backed you up, you'd be safe.

“You aren't averting your eyes, Sir Rudeus,” the Blessed Child pointed out.

“I guess my conscience is clean.”

I'd kept my eyes on hers for a while now. Part of it was just that I didn't give a damn anymore, but also, if she could see the past, maintaining eye contact would save me a lot of time explaining.

“Perhaps not, but are you sure you don't mind me knowing everything else?”

I didn't reply.

“Goodness, Sir Orsted has a curse like that...ah, the Man-God...their first words were...oh, dear!” The Blessed Child's face suddenly turned red.

What, did you see something dirty? Don't you see that stuff all the time in inquisitions? You must get a good look every time a Millis priest sleeps around.

“Two at once, dear me...two, yet still love...oh...oh, an altar...wait...oh!” She was sweating and out of breath.

Saw something you shouldn't have, hmm?

"What did you see?" I inquired.

"Heres—" She coughed. "Ah, I mean, I see those not of the Millis faith have rather extreme...that is to say, *different* rituals, to ours..."

"You just saw the core of my soul."

"I-I see," she said, flattening the hem of her skirt and drawing back from me a little.

Relax. Maybe the Roxy faith isn't as pure as yours here in Millis, but it's still a pretty nice shade of blue. You won't find any ero doujin stuff here.

We both coughed. "Let's get back to business," I suggested.

"Yes, that sounds good," she agreed.

The Blessed Child seeing all that wouldn't cause me any problems, but it was a bit embarrassing having someone know about it. If she'd seen me doing it with both of them, she might know what I said then, too.

It's not like that! I just got a bit overexcited and it slipped out. This never happens to me!

Anyway, back to our conversation.

"First, I want to know how this happened. Who do you think is pulling the strings here?"

"I imagine it's either His Holiness the pope, or the cardinal who wants to depose him. I shouldn't think that the Man-God is involved."

So the top dogs of the Demon Expulsionists. But what about the Latrias...?

"You don't think the Latrias are involved?"

"It is possible someone else is using them, but I don't think they're behind all of this."

So Zenith's abduction wasn't related. Right now, we were down to the papalists, or the cardinalists. Both leaders were suspect.

"What makes you think the Man-God isn't involved?"

“If His Holiness were to submit to the Man-God, it would bring disgrace upon the whole of the Millis Church. His Holiness may not be a good person, but I cannot fault his faith.”

“But how can you be sure?”

“When I look into his eyes, I shall know.”

Okay, stupid question: Could I trust her?

“If you don’t trust me, you’ll be best served using me as a hostage to get what you want.”

“I’m not holding enough cards to make that work. The Temple Knights are probably already moving in on me. Even if I demanded something in exchange for you, I’d still—”

“I am everything to the Temple Knights,” she said, cutting me off. She smiled dreamily at me. “The Temple Knights—no, the whole demon expulsionist faction—know that if I die, they lose their chance at victory.”

“Basically, whatever they try to tell me, if I go hardball and threaten to kill you, they’ll do anything I want?”

“I flatter myself to say that yes, I am that valuable.”

I wonder... Crap, I better not have to watch Aisha die in front of me because I trusted you.

“The Temple Knights aren’t dumb, and they’re not incompetent either,” I said. “For all I know they arrested Aisha and already got this location out of her. Hell, they wouldn’t even have to do that. If they were keeping an eye on me, they’ll come looking here right away. They could charge in and rescue you while I’m off making my demands at the church headquarters.”

“Then clearly you should take me with you when you make your demands.”

“Bold move, but if they ambush us on the way it could turn into an all-out battle.”

“Surely *you* could take down the lot of them? You held your own against the likes of Sir Orsted and Auber, did you not?”

She'd seen that too? Sure, it was possible that I could hold off the Temple Knights. Not to brag, but I've done my fair share of mowing down small-timers. You could call me Rudeus "camp the noobs" Greyrat. Back in the garden battle, I took care to hold myself back, but if I'd been fighting to kill, they wouldn't have stood a chance.

"Besides," she continued, "if we were attacked, it would be by papalists, not the Temple Knights."

"How d'ya figure?"

"The Temple Knights won't do anything that could risk my death. The pope, on the other hand, would be delighted if I *just happened* to die."

If you asked them, of *course* the papalists protected the Blessed Child. If there *happened* to be a fight and she *happened* to get killed in the crossfire, however...that would only be good news for them.

"What if the Temple Knights use barrier magic or something to steal you back without risking you getting hurt?"

"You just defeated the best fighters in the Temple Knights. It's not their style to repeat a failing strategy. They wouldn't take the risk."

The guys from before were their best fighters...? I mean they coordinated well, but seriously...? No come on, that's not fair. They were good enough to keep firing magic at me even while dodging my Stone Cannons. And that guy didn't hesitate when he tried to go up against my Magic Armor with a sword.

Assuming they were, on average, Advanced-level Sword God Style and Advanced-level Water God Style, with intermediate attack magic, intermediate barrier magic, and intermediate healing magic, they were a seriously elite and versatile team. There was a bit of individual variation to account for, but their seamless coordination against me was a testament to their overall caliber. Okay, Therese was a class below the others, but she'd been a capable commander. I was pretty sure that I could have held my own even without the Version One, but they would've had a real shot. I'd still taken out their best guys, though, so maybe she was right...

Hold up, we're only talking about the Temple Knights here.

“Aren’t there Missionary Knights and Sanctuary Knights as well?” I asked.

“Those orders serve the Holy Country of Millis,” replied the Blessed Child. “They don’t get involved in the petty quarrels of the church. Besides, the Missionary Knights are out of the country at present.”

They’re not even here? I was starting to feel like I might have a chance. I’d show them my hostage and engage them in fair and honest negotiations.

After this sudden, violent attack I, the almighty Rudeus, follower of Orsted, have taken offense. Though I would be within my rights to draw and quarter the Blessed Child and cast down the light of the Holy Church of Millis, I shall be merciful. If you comply with my demands and apologize directly, I shall forgive you, and spare the Blessed Child’s life.

Work in progress, we’ll go with that. While I negotiated, I’d get the Blessed Child to work out who’d betrayed me and the identities of the Man-God’s disciples. It was possible that some of this would come and bite me in the ass later, but assuming the negotiations themselves went smoothly, I was confident we could get out of the country unscathed. The mercenary band would probably have to wait. That was fine. I’d come back in a few years, once Cliff had established himself as a major player, and we’d talk then. I’d have to keep an eye on things, though. If, for example, it turned out that the pope was a disciple of the Man-God, I’d have no choice but to tear Cliff away from his ambitions in Millis. It wouldn’t be fair to him, but sometimes life *is* unfair.

“If the other knight orders concern you, I suggest you act sooner rather than later. If they did arrest one of your friends, the longer we wait the more likely it is that something terrible will happen.”

“Agreed.”

Only an hour had passed since I’d kidnapped the Blessed Child. The worst-case scenario was that Aisha and Geese were already under arrest, but there was no way the knights had had time to find them both, arrest them, *and* torture them yet. Still, the longer I hid, the more desperate they would become. People do crazy things when they’re desperate.

Okay. The next bit is going to be a gamble. If this goes wrong, someone is going to die along with the Blessed Child. I have to be ready for that.

I wanted to feel ready, but I didn't. What I wanted was a trump card to store up my sleeve.

"Hey," I said.

"Yes?"

"Why are you helping me, anyway? How come you just stood by and let me kidnap you?"

The Blessed Child gazed at me, puzzled, then she smiled softly. Now that was a smile befitting the symbol of the Millis Church.

"I owe my life to you and the warrior of the Superd tribe," she replied.

Did she see that in my memories? Or did she look into Eris's memories last time? Impossible to say, but it was Ruijerd and me who brought Eris to Millis last time.

I was skeptical all the same—her answer was too much like what I wanted to hear.

"Does that not convince you? Then how about this: I was angry—angry to see my new friend and my most trusted servants forced to kill one another."

Hm...

"I also wanted to thank you," she went on, "for all the time you spent with me making me laugh, and for the picture you made for me. As Saint Millis says, 'Thou shalt be gracious and repay that which thou receivest.'"

Hmmm...

"From the beginning, I intended to find a way to help you in secret when you came seeking assistance on your mother's behalf...but you did not ask it of me."

When I still didn't say anything, the Blessed Child pouted, and said, "You only kidnapped me in the first place because a single glance told you that I wasn't your enemy, isn't that right?"

"I suppose," I said.

Yeah, I suppose I had thought that. That was why I'd grabbed her right away, and how we ended up back here, having this conversation.

Right. Too late to have second thoughts. Ending up on the back foot is what got me into this mess, and thinking isn't going to make it better.

When I went in next, I needed to make sure I was in a stronger position so I could get what I wanted. My goals were as follows:

One: Get Zenith back.

Two: Guarantee Aisha, Geese, and Cliff's safety.

Three: Make sure I didn't cause problems for Cliff down the road.

Four: Get the mercenary band up and running.

Five: Get permission to sell Ruijerd figures.

Six: Make Millis my ally.

My immediate objective was to tick off one and two.

This time, I was going to make the first move. I'd drawn a good card—the Blessed Child. Not that I was a dud card myself, mind you. The thing to do now, then, was to take my turn first and without warning...before yet another idiot who didn't understand what was going on could complicate things.

"If this all gets worked out, and I don't make enemies..." I said at last, "I'll bring Eris to visit next time."

"Please do," said the Blessed Child.

Off we go, then.

Back to the church we went.

It must have been two or three hours since my fight with Therese's gang. There wasn't a single Temple Knight out on the streets. It was almost eerie. That had to mean Geese and Cliff hadn't informed on me. I'd gotten myself and the Blessed Child out of the garden with a teleportation scroll. Most of society didn't even know that teleportation circles existed, never mind scrolls. The Temple Knights had sealed the entrance to the garden, so the logical assumption was that we were still inside. It would take whoever was in charge maybe an hour to deduce that we'd gotten out, and then they'd move on to the

next step: calling in the rest of the Temple Knights to search the city. Tack on another hour to put together a search team. Finally I added an hour for delays and hold ups...by now, they might have locked the city gate, but they shouldn't have mobilized quite yet. Mobilizing a sprawling outfit like that isn't easy!

Cliff and Geese were both aware of teleportation circles. Geese was there when I set this one up as an emergency escape route, and Cliff helped when I drew the teleportation circle in the basement of our office in Sharia. More to the point: if Cliff or Geese had turned on me, the Temple Knights would have known where the teleportation circle led to. I could rule them out right now as snitches. But the pope and the cardinal should have guessed I was getting around using teleportation circles. They'd collected enough intel on me. The same went if the Man-God was pulling the strings from behind the scenes.

I'd ruled out every suspect. Weird. Just a few hours had passed, but surely my opponent was back footed. There was no way Therese had actually been acting alone. Right?

We arrived at the church headquarters while I mused on the matter. As we approached, a procession of dudes in blue armor came filing out, one after another.

"It's the Blessed Child..."

"Rudeus brought the Blessed Child!"

"Call for reinforcements!"

More and more and more of them emerged from the church, and from the city around us. In a moment, we were surrounded. How was I gonna pull this off?

"Sir Rudeus," said the Blessed Child, "whatever you do, don't let go of me."

I didn't reply. She was my lifeline. I kept my grip on her arms.

None of the Temple Knights had their swords out, but they sounded pretty upset. They weren't gonna risk hurting her. Just like the Blessed Child had said.

"How could you treat her with such violence!"

"By taking the Blessed Child hostage you bring shame upon all believers in

Millis! You won't get away with this!"

"Rudeus, you bastard...even I've never laid hands on the Blessed Child..."

That's um, an interesting thing to be mad about, I thought. Before I could even get a word in, everyone had assumed that the Blessed Child was my hostage. Okay, well, not wrong. After knocking out her guard and spiriting her away, what else were they supposed to think? Maybe whoever was behind all this knew how it'd look.

"Captain, let's get him! After his fight with the Keepers of Anastasia he can't have much magic left," said one knight.

"Not yet—he must have enough in reserve to kill the Blessed Child," cautioned another.

The first replied, "No problem. If we all attack together, he'll save his own skin before he tries to harm her." That one kept trying to rile the others up. Was this the mastermind's agent?

"Who does he serve?" I asked, keeping my voice low. "The Man-God?"

"No," the Blessed Child whispered back. "He works for His Holiness, the pope. He has no connection to the Man-God, and I don't think he knows the details of what's happened."

Okay, yeah. Maybe I'm getting paranoid. Right. Time to get the ball rolling.

"I demand to speak to the pope about today's events! Out of my way!" I bellowed in the loudest, most imperious voice I could manage. In response, the Temple Knights got rowdier.

"How dare you!"

"You think the pope will grant an audience to a worm like you?"

"Release the Blessed Child at once and face judgment!"

A few even began to draw their swords.

When the Blessed Child twitched in my arms though, all of them begrudgingly returned their swords to their scabbards.

Hot damn, they're totally powerless against her. I got the picture after the

Keepers of Anastasia, but she's literally an idol to them.

Here goes... I cleared my throat.

"My name is Rudeus Greyrat! I represent the Dragon God Orsted! I swear upon his mighty name that I do not wish to harm the Blessed Child!"

I raised my left hand, showing them the glittering bracelet Orsted had given me. It wasn't the strongest proof of identity, but it made for a decent bluff.

"However!" I continued. "If my request to speak with the pope is denied, I cannot guarantee her safety! Know that by making an enemy of Rudeus Greyrat, the Church of Millis will be the enemy of the Dragon God and all his followers!"

I was playing hardball here. I'd even memorized a little speech. I was using Orsted's name without permission, but that should be fine. Also, he didn't actually have that many followers. Details.

The Temple Knights recoiled a step away from me. With just a few words, I'd made them see me not as a petty Child-nabber, but a big deal with organizational backing.

I had my cards lined up. Great.

"I demand an explanation from His Holiness himself for the disgraceful assault I suffered earlier today! Why was an attempt made on the life of the Dragon God's representative? Why is my mother being held captive? The answers to these questions will decide whether your Blessed Child lives or dies!"

Hey, I'm just a visitor here. One day, without warning, I was accused of plotting a kidnapping, and an attempt was made on my life. Now I'm mad. Really, I'm furious. I want an apology, and compensation. And while I'm here, I'm making Zenith the Holy Millis Church's problem, too.

There was a pause.

"What do we do...?"

"What are we supposed to do? He's got the Blessed Child as his hostage..."

The Temple Knights still didn't let me through. They kept dithering. I guess a bunch of grunts didn't want to make the call themselves.

Maybe if I waited, their commander would come out. At least, that's what I was thinking, when—

“Let him through!”

“Get out of the way!”

“Are you going to let the Blessed Child be killed in front of us?”

All of a sudden, there was a minor commotion at the back of the group. Four men and women pushed their way through. I knew three of them. They were from the Keepers of Anastasia. It hurt to look at the dents in their armor. One of the three was Therese. She saw me, then looked down in shame.

The fourth person was a man in his late fifties with a white beard. His face was covered in deep wrinkles, but his gaze was sharp and youthful. Who was he? I'd never seen him before. He wore blue armor, the Temple Knight uniform, but his armor was a little more elaborate than the others. A level up from Therese's.

If the dudes around us were normal temple knights, and the Keepers of Anastasia were grunt temple knights, and Therese was elite, then this guy was the King of the Temple Knights.

“I am the commander of the Sword Company of the Temple Knights. My name is Carlisle Latria.”

Oh. So this is Carlisle. Grandpa.

“I'm sorry we have to meet under such circumstances,” I replied promptly. “I am Rudeus Greyrat, son of Zenith Greyrat.” Carlisle eyed me like a hawk. His eyes were even more piercing than Claire's. On that point, husband and wife resembled each other. I didn't want to fall into a verbal tug-of-war with this guy.

“Is that all?” he said.

“...No.” It took me a moment to work out what he meant, but then I remembered my exchange with Claire, and shook my head. Here, I was Orsted's follower. I was still Zenith's son, of course, but that wasn't the role I was assuming here. There couldn't be fair negotiations unless we saw each other as

equals.

“I am Rudeus Greyrat, representative of the Dragon God Orsted,” I said, puffing up my chest and sticking out my chin, like I’d seen Eris do. “I have come to demand an audience with his Holiness the pope.”

After I was finished, Carlisle’s face softened for a brief moment. “Hm,” he said. Then, his expression closed off again. “I’ll take you. Come.”

With that hard look fixed on his face, he turned and marched away. Therese and the others followed, looking troubled.

“What do you think?” I asked the Blessed Child quietly.

“It appears that Therese was merely following the orders of the Cardinal,” she replied. “Carlisle wouldn’t meet my eyes, so for him, I cannot say.”

That’s a handy trick. So Carlisle was a mystery. He didn’t feel like an enemy, but I didn’t trust him. Best to stay on guard. Leaving behind the Temple Knights who stood back, watching us from a safe distance, I went after Carlisle and the others.

He led me directly to the inner sanctum. As we walked, the other members of the Keepers of Anastasia formed up around us. They weren’t wearing their helmets this time. All of them were up and on their own feet, probably thanks to healing magic. I wasn’t letting my guard down, but their plan wasn’t to attack me, clearly.

In a head-on battle, I’d broken through their precious King-tier barrier and soundly beat every last one of them to a pulp. While they hadn’t been fighting to kill either, I’d gone easy on them. They knew it. We were all very clear on who was stronger here, and by how much. On top of that, I had the Blessed Child. They weren’t about to pick a fight with the guy who’d KO’d them only hours ago when her life was on the line. Why did everyone look so awkward, anyway? Mr. Dust was the worst. He’d been avoiding my eyes the whole time.

I wasn’t feeling hostility, though. That wasn’t the vibe. They didn’t seem wary of me at all, actually. If I didn’t know better, I’d say they were *guarding* me.

Hmm...

We kept walking through the inner sanctum for a while. Before I knew it, I'd lost all sense of direction. Blame it on the slight curve in the passage combined with however many seventy-degree corners we'd turned...

Last time I was here I thought this twisty maze of passages were too alike.

"This is like a labyrinth," I remarked.

"Indeed. It was built this way so the pope and I can make a quick escape if necessary," the Blessed Child informed me. So it wasn't barrier magic or something of that nature then. I didn't need to worry about suddenly being put to sleep or tripping a booby trap.

"That's right!" The fanboys started proudly chattering around us.

"The Blessed Child knows every inch of these passageways!"

"She always used to get away from us when we played tag!"

So it was designed like this to let the important people get out. Standard security. But I was starting to lose track of where I was. If I were ambushed from behind, there was no way out... Wait, no, I could just smash through the ceiling and get out that way. Or the walls... Well, they probably had barrier magic on them, but the stone of absorption should take care of that.

Okay. I should probably have thought this through a bit more before I dove in, but everything's gonna be fine.

"Are we almost there? I'd rather not go too far in..."

"Just a little further," said Carlisle, without looking back.

Really? You'd better not be leading me into a trap. I turned a wary eye to the other guys behind us. They all flinched, then started protesting.

"Lord Carlisle! You mustn't be rude! At least turn around when you address him!"

"Who knows what he might do to the Blessed Child if he gets upset!"

"My lord, look at these dents! Do you see what he did to my Temple Knight Armor? He wields incredible power!"

"Imagine the horrible mark he might leave on the Blessed Child if we offended

him...”

“Silence, all of you!” roared Therese, and the otaku shut up. Carlisle stopped walking, then turned. Slowly, to face me.

“Just a little further.”

“...Thank you,” I said with a nod, and we continued on.

We only took another ten steps or so, then Carlisle stopped in front of a door and knocked.

“I have brought Rudeus Greyrat to see you, Your Holiness,” he announced.

It really was just a little further. I felt kinda bad for rushing him. Now I thought about it, I didn’t know which direction I was facing anymore but we’d only *actually* turned two corners. If I needed an escape route, I had one.

“Enter,” came the pope’s voice. Carlisle faced the door, said a brief prayer, then opened it. He held the door and gestured for me to enter.

“Go ahead,” he said. Keeping my grip firmly on the Blessed Child, I went into the room. Part of me thought surely now I could let go of her...but no. I couldn’t let my guard down yet.

I found myself in what looked like a meeting room. There was a long table at which ten people sat facing each other. One of them was the pope. Cliff was there too, and an old man wearing a luxurious vestment similar to the pope’s. That had to be the cardinal. There was also a man clad in white armor. In the back of the room, seven knights stood with their hands clasped behind their backs. Two of them I recognized as the pope’s guards. Everyone was looking at me. It looked like my entrance had interrupted a fierce debate. They stared wordlessly toward us.

At the far end of the table sat two more people. One was an old lady, her lips set in a hard line as she glared at me. Claire Latria. And beside her...

She’s here, I thought. *I finally found her.* Seated beside Claire, a woman gazed up at the ceiling with empty eyes. She was close to forty, but she looked younger. The woman my father had loved more than anyone in the world.

It was my mother. Zenith.

Wait, I thought. Why are they here?

What was going on? I hadn't made any demands yet. I hadn't told anyone to bring Zenith to me.

Bang.

The door slamming shut behind me shattered the silence. The Temple Knights moved into position in front of it, standing in a row as though to face down the knights in the back of the room. Therese alone took a position at the table.

"Now that all the pieces are on the board," the pope said from his seat at the far end, "let's talk, shall we?" Apparently, a lot had happened in the last few hours. So much for making the first move. I was a pawn in someone else's plan. Again.

"Ugh," I sighed through clenched teeth.

"Rudeus, Blessed Child," the pope went on, "won't you both take your seats?"

It looked like I had a talent for getting caught off guard. But I hadn't lost yet.

Let's see where this goes.

Chapter 5:

What's Stopping You?

I KEPT THE SHOCK I felt from seeing Zenith and Claire from showing on my face...I think. I wasn't sure I could win this standoff or that everything would turn out okay. The only thing I could control was me, and I'd do what I could. It only took a second to run a mental simulation of how to get Zenith out.

I couldn't use a teleportation circle in front of this many people, but I had a good idea of the capabilities of the Temple Knights. I didn't know how strong the Temple Knights lined up behind the pope were, but if the Blessed Child were telling the truth, they wouldn't be stronger than the Keepers of Anastasia.

I could get Zenith. Just knowing that, I'd as good as achieved one of my goals. I'd get Zenith and Cliff, then get Aisha, and Geese. Then we'd get the hell out. I was worried Aisha and Geese were being held somewhere, but I could find out if and where from one of these guys.

With that plan in mind, I escorted the Blessed Child to her chair and stood beside her. I kept tight hold of her arms.

Before I sat down in the seat next to hers, I said, "I'm so glad you're all here. It'll make everything go more quickly."

I was perfectly calm—the words rolled easily off my tongue. It'd been a while since I felt like myself.

"I believe this is the first time a number of us have met," I went on. "I represent the Dragon God Orsted, and I came here to deepen his bonds of friendship with the Millis Church."

The title of *Dragon God* sent a ripple of unease shivering around the table. No one here had met Orsted in person, and I seriously doubted any of them knew about his objectives. What we were up against. Possibly some of them hadn't even heard of the Seven Great Powers. But everyone knew the title Dragon God. It was usually found alongside another title: "Demon God."

“Owing to unfortunate circumstances,” I went on, “I currently hold the Blessed Child’s life in my hands.”

I pointed at her and concentrated my magic to make a lighter-sized flame at my fingertip. The tension in the room mounted.

“I can’t tell you how much I regret that it had to come to this. To stoop to taking hostages is to bring dishonor upon the name of a superlative uber being like Sir Orsted. Alas, it was a necessary measure in order to facilitate these negotiations—and to guarantee my own safety and that of my subordinates. I hope you all understand.”

“A superlative...uber...?”

My tongue ran away with me there. I wasn’t trying to be funny, promise.

I coughed, then continued. “Why,” I said, looking around the table, “was this attempt made upon my life? Why was I forced to bring shame upon my master’s name?” My eyes came to rest on Claire. She was frowning. “Would anyone here care to explain? If no explanation is forthcoming, I, along with the Dragon God Orsted and all his followers, will have no choice but to move to open hostilities with the Millis Church.”

This wasn’t an empty threat. If the Man-God had the top members of the Millis Church in his back pocket, then it was a potential development I had to consider.

The room stayed silent. Not one person took the bait. No cries of “Bring it on, then!”

Were they all freaked out by the fight earlier today? Or did I say something weird again?

Well at the very least, I’d made it clear that I was pissed off.

“Lord Rudeus, I appreciate that you are angry.” The answer came from the very back of the room. He sat facing me front on, with Cliff at his side. Pope Harry Grimor. The most important guy here.

“However, as you yourself acknowledge,” he went on, “you are unacquainted with several of our number gathered here today. May I introduce everyone?”

When I didn't reply, he added, "I won't take too much of your time."

I tried to work out what his angle was. Why would he make introductions? To buy time? Were his people capturing Aisha as we spoke? But there weren't *that* many people here. It couldn't hurt to know a bit more about the others. It's important, when making demands, to do everything in the right order. People will only hear you out if you condition them properly. If all you do is chatter what you want to say when they're not ready to listen, nothing will get through.

"Of course. I shouldn't have rushed things."

"Thank you...Cliff, if you'd be so kind?"

"Yes, Your Holiness," Cliff said, standing up. "Good day, everyone. I am Father Cliff Grimor. His Holiness Pope Harry Grimor is my grandfather." He took a step back from the table. Apparently Cliff would serve as our MC.

"May I ask you to begin, Cardinal Leblanc?" he said. The man whose vestments rivaled the pope's stood up. His face was, in a word, fat. It was perfectly round, like a certain bread-faced ally of justice. He was also the head honcho of the Demon Expulsionists.

"I am Cardinal Leblanc McFarlane," he said. "I supervise the Temple Knights and assist the Holy Father." In other words, he was effectively number two in the whole of the Millis Church. Right, the cardinal's job was advising the pope... A bit like the prime minister in a monarchy.

The pope and his relationship to the cardinals in the Millis Church weren't *quite* like ones in the religion I knew. I did know this pope and this cardinal were definitely working against each other, though.

He's got his eyes on becoming the next pope. I wonder if they hold elections every few years or something...

As I thought this, the cardinal sat down. *So by 'introduction' he literally just meant name and occupation.*

"Sir Bellemond," Cliff called. A man in white armor sat next to Leblanc stood up. His face was scarred, and he only had one eye. He looked about forty. The white armor meant he was a Cathedral Knight. Man, did he look grim. From what I remembered, the Cathedral Knights were sort of like the paladins of

Millis. He must be ticked off that I'd caused havoc in his town.

"I am Bellemond Nash Vennik, deputy commander of the Arrow Company of the Cathedral Knights," he said curtly, then sat down again.

Haven't I heard that name somewhere before?

He kept glaring steadily at me but didn't comment. Maybe his face just reminded me of someone. Like Orsted, or Ruijerd...

Ah, now I remembered. That knight Ruijerd knew had a similar name. Yeah, Galgard Nash Venik. Gash, for short.

"I knew a Galgard Nash Vennik..."

"I'm his son," he replied.

"He's a man I was glad to have known." Interesting. His father was a Missionary Knight but it had been acceptable for him to join a different order. Well, he'd made it to deputy commander, so I guess he hadn't failed in his filial duties.

"Sir Railbard," the pope continued. Two more knights in white armor came next. I didn't know them, but they introduced themselves as Arrow Company senior captains. These companies were some kind of military unit type affair. Senior captain was the next most important rank after the commander, deputy commander, and company leader.

"Lord Carlisle."

"You may skip me; Rudeus and I spoke earlier," said Carlisle Latria, declining to introduce himself. I wondered if that was allowed, but then realized the pope hadn't introduced himself either. Claire would probably opt out too.

The introductions continued. There was an archbishop, and the company leader from the Temple Knights' Shield Company. I decided to remember their names, just in case. It might never be important, but there was no harm in knowing. At times like these, I wished we could exchange business cards...

"Lady Claire." She'd been called. What was she even doing here amongst all these important folk? Was she some sort of witness? Maybe *she* was the one who'd spread the fake rumor about me kidnapping the Blessed Child. And why

had she brought Zenith?

Part of me wanted to demand answers right away, but I got the feeling an explanation was coming. Best to be patient for now.

“I am Claire Latria, wife of Count Carlisle Latria, and this is my daughter, Zenith. Please forgive her demeanor. I’m afraid she is unwell,” Claire said primly, then sat down.

That seemed to be everyone present. The guards hadn’t introduced themselves, but that probably just meant they didn’t get a voice at this table.

“Very good,” said the pope. “Now that Lord Rudeus is with us, I would like to hear what happened.” Our discussion began.

“First of all, Rudeus, I’d like to clearly establish the context for all this. Do you mind?” From the pope’s choice of words, I guessed that he had gotten wind of what happened not long ago himself.

“No objections here. I’d like to hear it.”

Several hours had passed since the fight. That the cardinal and the important folk from each Knight Order were all gathered here seemed a bit suspicious, but the order commanders’ absence tempered that somewhat. It felt more like, upon hearing of the Blessed Child’s abduction, they’d grabbed the most important people they had on hand. Though it struck me as a bit odd to see the Temple Knights who’d been in the middle of all this standing here.

“All right, where shall we begin...” the pope said. “Forgive me—I heard the details but a few moments prior. I haven’t had time to process it yet.” He rubbed his brow. A man raised his hand. It was Sir Bellemond. Besh, if I remembered right.

“I believe we have the least information here. We came at the cardinal’s summons. Our orders were to return with the corpse of the man who sought to kill the Blessed Child and bring ruin upon the country.”

As I knew from Zanoba, a Blessed Child was an important national asset. Her kidnapping was good enough cause to invoke national ruin. Although the

church looked after this Blessed Child, making her their private property, her loss would still be a blow to the whole nation. Enough of one that such a summons couldn't be ignored.

"Upon arriving, however, we found her guards unconscious and the Blessed Child gone. Now, the kidnapper himself is here, angered and declaring himself blameless," Besh went on. He shot a glare at the cardinal. "Given the summons we received are at odds with reality, I would like to declare our neutrality in these proceedings." He sat down.

The pope smiled widely, then turned to look at the cardinal. "Your Eminence, might I trouble you to explain why you chose to deliver such a summons? Please face Mr. Rudeus when you answer."

Sounds like this was the cardinal's dirty work, I thought.

The cardinal stood up with a gentle smile, then said, "I received a tip-off from the House of Latria. The message said that someone had been overheard on the street making troubling statements about kidnapping the Blessed Child."

The House of Latria...overheard on the street... Could someone have followed me home after my second visit to Claire's house? I hadn't noticed anything at all, but I did make a scene before leaving. She might have sent someone to keep an eye on me, to make sure I didn't try something. I suppose I *had* talked about kidnapping the Blessed Child out in the open. Anyone could have heard us. It could easily have reached the ears of a Latria servant simply by coincidence. The walls have ears, as they say, or in this case the streets. Nowhere was safe.

"When I looked into the identity of the speaker," the cardinal continued, "I found it was Rudeus Greyrat. The subordinate I sent to investigate claimed that Rudeus was abusing his relationship with Therese to get close to the Blessed Child."

According to the cardinal, he didn't usually give much credence to rumors. Roadside banter wasn't out of the ordinary and the Temple Knights didn't have time to go chasing up every nasty comment they heard on the street. But I had demons among my closest friends, and I was close to the grandson of a pope who pushed for accommodations for demonfolk. On top of that I'd also severed my ties with the Latrias. I cut a fairly fishy figure, for sure. Then, right after I

quarreled with the Latrias I'd gone straight for the Blessed Child. That distracting the Blessed Child's guards so that I could kidnap and murder her lay clearly within my capabilities was the clear deciding factor. I had both the ability and the motive.

"I decided to move against him first," the cardinal finished.

"I see... But, Cardinal, that doesn't match up with the testimony from the Cathedral Knights. There's a significant difference between kidnap and murder."

"I imagine the messenger I sent got a little carried away in relaying the message," the cardinal replied. His face was placid, but the latest facts told me all I needed to know about his intentions.

He'd wanted to set me up for attempted murder of the Blessed Child, then make it look like the pope was directing me behind the scenes. Too bad for him. His precious Temple Knights got knocked out and now everyone could see that I didn't want to kill a single one of them, let alone the Blessed Child.

"Very well... Before we come to you, Sir Carlisle," the pope continued, "let's hear from Rudeus. What say you?"

I was silent for a moment, taken aback by the sudden question. After a second of consideration, I realized I didn't need to lie. I had nothing to be ashamed of.

"I admit I did let my mouth run away with me and raised the idea of kidnapping the Blessed Child...but that was only a heat-of-the-moment comment. My companions immediately rejected the idea, and it never went anywhere."

"Then why did you seek out the Blessed Child?"

"I sought my aunt Therese's support in resolving a family disagreement with the Latrias. I realize it may have appeared that the Blessed Child was my target."

"Oh? But if that is the truth, how is it that you now have the Blessed Child as your hostage?" The Pope's voice was friendly, even though his questions felt like a cross-examination. It was a voice that said *don't worry, just tell the truth and everything will be okay.*

“As I said before,” I replied, “I took an important hostage to guarantee my own safety. Only after the Blessed Child gave me her consent, of course.”

“Is that true?” the pope asked.

“It is,” the Blessed Child answered. “I needed only to look into Rudeus’s eyes to see he was guiltless.” She looked around the table, and the Pope and the cardinal casually averted their eyes.

Must be hard, having that much guilt to cover up, I thought.

“If that’s the case, why did you knock out the Temple Knights? Surely you could have resolved this through words,” asked the pope.

“I was trapped inside a barrier without warning and subjected to a ridiculous trial while all my protests fell on deaf ears. They told me they were going to cut off my arms. There was no reason not to resist,” I replied. *Though I guess I didn’t need to knock all of them out.*

Leaving Therese standing and reasoning with her might have been the smarter move. Had Therese been there when the Blessed Child came out and saw me do nothing, she might have listened... No, that was stupid. I had no clue the Blessed Child would show up, and the vibes back there had *not* made it feel like we were gonna resolve anything with words. A trial where the verdict was already decided. I’d experienced something like that in my past life too.

“I see... Well, then...” the Pope said. He was slowly working up to addressing the heart of the matter. “What, then, is this family disagreement all about?”

I saw Claire twitch, and something dark welled up within me. The memory of her petty narcissism played in my mind. I could put up with anything she did to me. What I couldn’t tolerate was what she said to Aisha. What she said to Zenith. She’d been horrible to Geese as well.

“My mother—that woman—was abducted by the countess and kept away from me,” I said. As I spoke, my frustration mounted. “She intends to force my mother, who cannot even *speak*, into marriage with an unknown man, with no regard for my mother’s own desires. She even intends to force her to bear children.” My voice grew ragged. “When I objected, the countess used cowardly means to kidnap my mother. Then, when I went to her demanding answers, she

feigned ignorance of the whole affair!”

Everyone at the table looked horrified. Therese and the other Temple Knights had reached for their swords, their faces grim. The Blessed Child frowned slightly. It looked like I’d got the upper hand here.

“...That’s all I have to say,” I finished.

Any further words escaped me, so I left it there. I’d communicated my anger. Everyone was looking at the Latrias.

Carlisle and Claire. The pair of them were looking at Zenith with pity in their eyes. Zenith, in turn, stared blankly up at the ceiling.

“All right, Lord Carlisle, Lady Claire. Everything we’ve just heard seems to put the blame for this affair at your feet. What do you have to say for yourselves?” the pope asked.

The two of them exchanged a fleeting look. What were they plotting? I didn’t get the sense from the cardinal at least that he was going to come to their rescue.

“My wife acted on her own initiative. I know nothing about it,” said Carlisle.

He’d thrown her to the wolves. His own wife. Maybe that wasn’t so insane, though. If Claire really was like this all the time, and Carlisle had grown steadily more fed up with her, maybe he decided this was the time to dump her.

I knew that no matter how much chaos Eris caused with her outbursts, I’d never do that to her. I wasn’t about to claim that after years of marriage, it was absolutely unthinkable that I’d get fed up with any of my wives’ more annoying qualities, but I knew I’d never turn on them or abandon them. I’d never have gotten married in the first place if I didn’t believe that.

Seeing Carlisle do it kinda got under my skin. I remembered something Cliff had said ages back. In Millis, when a marriage was arranged, the bride’s family provided the dowry. In exchange, the groom swore to protect the bride’s house with their life. The definition of “house” in these circumstances was a bit unclear, but still, I couldn’t believe Carlisle was really going to abandon Claire here...

“I am the head of the family, and shall therefore take full responsibility. I wish to make it clear, however, that this was not a decision made by the whole Latria family,” he said.

That little addendum is how you show you have a conscience, huh?

“I see. Lady Claire, what say you?” said the pope.

Claire didn’t answer. Her mouth was clamped shut in a hard line. She looked like a sulking child.

“Silence will be taken as an admission of guilt,” the pope said, looking around the table. Then, without waiting for anyone to speak, he went on. “In that case, we find Lady Claire responsible for this affair, along with Sir Carlisle as her collaborator. Lady Claire shall face punishment, and Sir Carlisle shall bear responsibility for her actions. Are there any objections?”

Something was wrong; this was too easy. We’d missed something crucial. It was like we were just going through the motions to reach a foregone conclusion.

“No objections!” The first one to reply was the cardinal.

“No objections!” echoed the others, nodding. Claire’s face was gray, but she kept her composure.

She’s not going to say anything? No excuses? I thought. *But then, her half-assed excuses would just make me sick anyway.* I was happy so long as Zenith came home with me. After this, I’d never go near the Latrias again. I wouldn’t let Zenith or Aisha or Norn go anywhere near them either. It was over.

“Are you satisfied with that, Rudeus?” the pope asked me. “It was not our intention for things to happen this way. We never intended any offense to you, nor to invite the enmity of Sir Orsted. I hope that we can remain friends...” He was still smiling that friendly smile. I looked at the cardinal. He kept up a smile of his own, but when our eyes met he swallowed, and I saw he was sweating.

“N-naturally, we want to avoid conflict with Sir Orsted. I don’t know how he came to foresee the resurrection of Laplace, but I will not spurn any ally in that fight. We shall have to seriously consider this proposition to allow the sale of these so-called demon figures at a later date...”

Over the course of this last exchange, I worked out the broad strokes of what was going on.

The one behind the kidnapping accusation and all the rest was the pope. I was pretty sure the leak came from his agents. He'd stolen the Latrias' name so that the cardinal would be provoked into making an attempt on my life. Either that, or he had an agent in the Latria household and the information came from there, but the details didn't matter. He couldn't have known for sure that the cardinal would act. From the cardinal's perspective though, I was a definite problem: a follower of the Dragon God who'd shown up as a friend of the pope's grandson. I'd caused problems for the Latrias, who were in the cardinal's faction, then that family squabble served as my cover to get close to the Blessed Child. To him, I probably looked like an assassin sent by the pope. You couldn't blame the guy for thinking he had to take me out. Had he only sent a few of the Temple Knights because he'd underestimated me, or because he'd seen this coming and wanted to be ready?

Had the pope known I wasn't going to kill the Blessed Child, or did he not care either way?

If I'd died at the Temple Knights' hands, well, no loss for him. I was Cliff's friend, but I wasn't one of his people. Throughout all of this, he hadn't done any of his dirty work directly, nor had he ordered me to carry out the kidnapping. He was confident he could get through even an inquisition with the Blessed Child, and if all else failed, he could pin it all on Cliff. Plus, even if Orsted did show up later, he could claim he'd just been caught in a Demon Expulsionist trap. Maybe he'd even use it as an opportunity to repair relations with Orsted.

And now this conclusion. In the end, the Latrias took the blame for the whole affair. I'd bet money that neither the pope nor the cardinal had given a damn who ended up on the chopping block in all this. The only reason the scapegoat ended up being Claire was because I was angry at her—all I wanted was to get back at her. The Pope could declare victory, knowing he'd struck a blow to the cardinalists via the Latrias. The cardinal's faction was the only loser here. I felt like I'd been played...but you know what? I was going to get Zenith back and have my revenge on Claire. At this rate I'd have the mercenary company up and running soon too. I had zero reason to object.

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“Very well. Precedent dictates that Claire Latria be sentenced to ten years imprisonment for inciting national mayhem.”

“Ewuh?” *Wow, that was a weird noise.*

“You object, Rudeus?”

“Um... You said ten *years*?”

“I did. Claire Latria kidnapped a family member of an associate of the Dragon God. Her actions also led to an attack on the Blessed Child.”

“But... I mean okay, yeah, but—”

“Her behavior has insulted powerful individuals and incited mayhem. Were you not such a good-hearted man, the Blessed Child would likely already be dead. Ten years is merciful when you consider it in that light.”

I mean...really? But okay, maybe that's fair. This did blow up enough that all the big shots ended up gathered here to sort it out.

Claire probably wouldn't be the only one to suffer for this, but still, ten years imprisonment... That...was a long time. Ten years back, I'd barely just broken up with Eris. A *really* long time.

I couldn't do much about it, though. Claire was the one who'd decided to play dirty. This all started because she'd abducted Zenith.

When I didn't say anything, the pope said, “No objections? Good, then this provisional court, presided over by at least three bishops and three senior captains, finds Lady Claire Latria guilty of inciting public mayhem and recommends ten years imprisonment. I will leave it to you, Sir Carlisle, to arrange a formal trial for her.”

“No objections.”

“No objections.”

The cardinal, the archbishop, and the knights all solemnly intoned their agreement.

“Good. Sir Bellemont, as our neutral party, I request that you take the Latrias

into custody. Once a formal sentence has been passed, the outcome shall be conveyed to the rest of you.” The Pope looked over at the Cathedral Knights and raised a hand. Besh and two others stood up at once, then came trotting around the table toward Carlisle and Claire.

As they passed Therese, she frowned for a split second. One of the knights pulled out a set of manacles and put them on Carlisle. Carlisle allowed his hands to be bound without a word, then followed the knight from the room of his own accord.

Claire? She didn’t move. She half stood up, but her whole body was trembling. Her expression hadn’t changed, but her shoulders and her legs were shaking.

“All right, Lady Claire.”

“I...” she said, “I...” The Cathedral Knights approached her. She was going to be arrested and thrown in a cell. It did leave a bit of a bitter aftertaste in my mouth, but it would also mean one of my problems tidied up.

Suddenly, my eyes met Cliff’s. He was staring at me, his expression all panic and confusion. What was that about? I mean sure, there were parts of this I didn’t like—this kangaroo court-style setup issuing a ten-year prison sentence, for one thing. It felt a bit vindictive.

These are the rules your people play by though, right? I thought of how the Temple Knights had tried to pull a similar stunt with me. *This conclusion is all above board so far as you guys are concerned, right?*

“Come on, Lady Claire,” said Besh, reaching slowly toward Claire like he was trying not to provoke her. Claire looked down at her hands with fear in her eyes. She looked like she wanted to leave her body.

“Ugh!” The next second, something went ramming into Besh. He staggered backward, his heavy armor clinking. Without missing a beat, he sank into a fighting stance, moved to draw his sword, then froze. What stopped him wasn’t Claire.

Standing there, between Claire and Carlisle, was Zenith. She had put herself between Claire and Besh. She had both her arms outstretched, blocking the

way. Her face was still blank as she faced him down, but the hostility was clear in her actions. She was *protecting* Claire. I was even more at a loss than before. Why would Zenith protect Claire? Was it a spur of the moment decision? She had reacted to her surroundings before this, though, and whenever she did it was always for the sake of her family. Was she reacting automatically, protecting her mother without understanding what her mother was trying to do to her?

I had to be missing something. I never had the right answer in this sort of situation. It had been just like this with Pax, now I came to think of it.

Get it together, I thought. If you think this through clearly, you might see what you missed.

There was no time, that was the issue. Besh would push Zenith aside and take Claire away in seconds. Should I stop him? Could I do that without working out the consequences first? Shouldn't I get more information before I acted?

"Stop this, please!" While I hesitated, another voice called out, bringing Besh to a halt. A small figure came pushing past to stand in front of Zenith. The guy who'd been looking at me reproachfully for a while now. It was Cliff.

"This isn't right!" he said, standing in as though to protect Zenith from Besh. "Ganging up on an elderly woman, pinning all of this on her... Saint Millis will punish us for this!"

"How dare you! A mere priest presumes to speak for Saint Millis and defy the just ruling of the church?!" shouted the cardinal.

"You think this is the will of Saint Millis? A husband spurning his wife, while their child stands alone to defend her mother against a mob coming to carry her away?"

"What child? She's a grown woman, and she's out of her mind!" the cardinal retorted.

"Age has nothing to do with it! A parent is a parent, and a child is a child!" Cliff said, shutting him down. Glowering, the cardinal turned to his own servants, the Temple Knights. A silent order to silence the troublemaker. But the one whose eyes he met was Therese. Cliff looked to her as well.

“Captain Therese Latria of the Temple Knights’ Shield Company! Are you not also this woman’s child? Did Saint Millis not say, ‘A knight does not forsake loyalty, be they faced with any manner of trial. Yet at times, bonds of love must be held higher than those of loyalty’? Do you not consider your own mother unworthy of your love? In all the years she raised you, did you never feel love for her? Do you owe her nothing?” Therese looked away, her face stricken. Cliff, his fury unrelenting, cast his eyes about the room. They came to rest on me. “And you, Rudeus!” he called out. His gaze was, as always, unwavering. It pierced right through me. “Is this what you wanted? I never thought I’d see you stoop to taking hostages—then to ensnare your own grandmother and have her locked up in a cell! Are you happy with this?!”

I didn’t reply. Cliff’s argument was a bit off the mark. I hadn’t taken the Blessed Child because I *wanted* to. And shutting Claire up in jail obviously hadn’t been my idea. Besides, what Claire had done was wrong. That was a fact. You do something bad, well, there are consequences for that, and you can’t get out of it by making a big emotional speech.

“I know you had your disagreements with her. But in all your family quarrels up till now, you resolved them by considering the other’s point of view! Norn told me all about it. After the awful way Norn treated you, you still went to her side when she despaired, without a thought for the past. This time too, you tried to work things out! You consulted with your grandfather and Therese to try to reach a peaceful solution. After all that, can you truly say you’re happy with *this*?”

Okay, so Cliff had a few things mixed up. The only reason I wanted a peaceful solution was for the sake of the mercenary band and Cliff himself. It wasn’t out of familial love. That was a quibble though, and Cliff wasn’t in the mood, so I stayed silent.

“Answer me!” Cliff shouted. “Rudeus Greyrat, do you condone this or not? Your answer will decide my opinion of your character!” For some reason, that hit me hard. It actually *hurt*. Why was that?

It hurts, I thought, because even I’m not crazy about seeing one of my family thrown in jail. It is Claire, though... It’s not like she treated me like family.

Claire was different. Claire was not my family. Something still niggled at me, though. I couldn't work out what it was, and until I did, I couldn't answer Cliff.

"Look, Cliff..." I began. "I'll give you an answer, but first I want to ask Claire something. Is that all right?" Cliff looked taken aback, but I didn't wait for a reply. Instead, I turned to Claire. There was fear in her eyes, but she met my gaze undaunted.

"Why did you take my mother from me?" I asked. Her expression didn't change.

"For the good of my daughter, and my family," she answered without hesitation.

"Did you really think marrying off your daughter in her current state would be for her own good?"

"Given the circumstances, I did," she replied. Before I knew it, my hands had curled into fists. My jaw was clenched tight. How could Claire be like this? She must know that if she'd just said, "No, I was wrong," she'd be off the hook.



I fell silent. The whole table looked at me expectantly, as though I suddenly had all the authority.

Wait, maybe I do, I realized. *I'm still holding the Blessed Child's arm.* From the start, this had never been a discussion amongst equals.

"Which is more important to you? Your daughter or your family?" I asked.

"Both of them. Neither is more important than the other," replied Claire, hedging.

That irritated me. Why wasn't she trying to persuade me? She knew I was the one with all the power in the room. If I said we should forgive her, this whole thing would go away. Okay, maybe not entirely, but she'd be off the hook for the ten years imprisonment at least. It's not like anyone died. We could settle for another punishment.

Come on. Get over yourself and just say it. Apologize...

As I hesitated, Claire snorted. "You needn't go out of your way for me," she said. "I never asked you to save me. If I am to be punished for what I did for my daughter's sake, then so be it."

I was at a loss for words. *What the actual... You... Oh screw it, this isn't going anywhere.*

Zenith had defended her. Cliff had defended her. Yet now she came out with *this?* I was done.

"If that's all you have to say, I think we're... Huh?" I trailed off as I felt something jab into my shoulder. Looking around, I saw the Blessed Child. She had jabbed me with the hand I wasn't holding on to.

"Rudeus," she said.

"What?" The Blessed Child no longer wore her usual serene smile. Instead, her face was blank. Blank, but somehow...unclouded. Like a saint.

"Spare her, Rudeus," she said.

"Why?"

I wasn't falling for this. I no longer had any intention of forgiving Claire. If

nothing else, she obviously had no interest in working things out. The stupid old hag wanted total control over her daughter and resented her pesky grandson for getting in the way. She was like a child throwing a tantrum, flinging her toys around when things didn't go her way.

"Lady Claire was truly thinking only of her daughter and her family," the Blessed Child insisted.

"Good intentions pave the road to hell," I retorted.

Thinking about others didn't mean anything if you didn't consider any viewpoints other than your own. If you were hell-bent on pushing what you thought was best on someone who didn't want it, you were better off minding your own business. Plus what Claire was pushing was seriously awful. No one would want that.

"Claire also considers you to be a part of that family, Rudeus."

"Excuse me?"

"All of this was for your sake as well."

For me? How does all of this follow then? How did we end up here? I needed her to work with me a bit more here. She wasn't making sense.

"Please, Rudeus. Trust me. When I looked into her eyes, I knew." Right, the Blessed Child's power. She could see your past in your eyes. So that meant Claire had to have some reason—not that I had any clue what it might be.

"Claire, care to shed any light on what the Blessed Child is saying? Because I'm not following."

"I'm afraid I'm at a loss myself," she snapped back. "I suppose even the Blessed Child must lie sometimes. I'm quite sure I never did anything for *you*."

There you go. Cliff, Blessed Child, you can try and cover for her all you like, but I can't back down after that. I do feel a little bad about it...

It was time to put an end to this.

I sighed. "I can't reconcile with her when she thinks nothing of me." Claire nodded, her gaze steady. Cliff stared at me in dismay. The Blessed Child looked sad. Therese's eyes went to Claire, and Sir Bellemont stood up. Zenith—I

realized that Zenith was standing right in front of me.

Um...

Slap. Her hand struck my cheek. There was almost no power in the blow. It probably wouldn't even leave a mark.

"What?"

For some reason, though, it hurt. I felt the place she'd slapped me growing unbearably hot.

"Nngh..."

All of a sudden, tears were rolling down my cheeks. In the time it took me to realize what was happening, Zenith had moved past me. I turned and saw Carlisle. The man who had stood there manacled, watching all this run its course, then left. Because he was standing behind me, I hadn't been able to see his face, but there was a whole mix of emotions there—worry, fear, regret.

Zenith slapped him too. Just like before, the blow was limp. Afterward, she kept walking, wobbling with each step. No one stopped her. Not the Cathedral Knights, not the Temple Knights, no one. It was like time had frozen around her.

At last, she stopped in front of Claire. She raised her hand, palm out and ready to... No slap came. She cradled Claire's face in both hands, leaning forward until their noses were almost touching, so she could peer into her mother's eyes. From where I stood, I couldn't see Zenith's expression. When Claire looked into her daughter's face, though, the effect was dramatic.

First, her eyes widened. Then, her lips began to tremble, followed by her cheeks, her shoulders, then her whole body. The shaking spread right down to her fingertips, then, as though triggered by the tremor, her arms rose up, and gripped Zenith's hands tight.

"Uwa...aaaa...waahh..."

The cry that burst out of Claire was something between a sob and a moan. She drew Zenith's hands up to her face as though she was going to kiss them and tears began to stream down her face. Then, perhaps succumbing to the shaking, her knees gave way and she sank to the ground.

“Oh!” came a voice from behind me just as someone ducked past. It was Carlisle. His hands still manacled, he rushed to Claire’s side. Lowering himself down beside her, he said, “Claire, my dear, you need to stop this.”

“Buh...uh, uh, but Zenith...” Claire moaned, her face streaked with tears.

Carlisle moved as though he wanted to embrace her, then remembered the manacles wouldn’t let him. Instead, he lay his hands on top of Claire’s, which still clasped Zenith’s.

“She’s okay. You don’t need to worry. She’s okay,” Carlisle said, then stood up. Claire’s sobs echoed through the room.

Carlisle looked around at everyone watching, then said, “I’m so sorry. I’ll tell you everything. I only ask that you reserve judgment until you’ve heard me out.” At this, time moved forward again. I didn’t think Carlisle had been addressing anyone in particular, but the pope, the cardinal, Cliff, Sir Bellemond, Therese, and all the Keepers of Anastasia turned to look at me. The Blessed Child tugged at my sleeve. With both hands.

I’d let go of her arm. The jig was up.

“...Fine,” I said, then collapsed back into my chair.

My cheek burned where Zenith had slapped me.

Chapter 6:

For the Good of My Daughter and My Family

FROM THE DAY SHE WAS BORN, Claire Latria was vain and hardheaded. As a child, she never admitted to any wrongdoing, and she only apologized when it was dragged out of her.

Her own mother—Rudeus’s great-grandmother, Meredy Latria—told her, “Conduct yourself correctly.”

But this advice was gravely misguided. Claire, unwilling and unable to see her own faults, believed she had none. That her stubbornness was justified. But mistakes make us human.

Claire took her mother’s advice, however, and it made her into a harsh girl. Not *correct*—just harsh. To herself most of all. She started her education and made mistakes—because that’s what an education is, in some ways. Rather than accept that, her standards for herself only increased in their rigidity and cruelty. And if she’d applied those torturous standards only to herself, you know, fine. But that’s not what happened. Nobody could meet her exacting specifications, and she made sure they suffered for it.

Without tempering her stubbornness and vanity, her mother’s advice had ruined her. She had these twisted virtues. She was tough, and so she pushed through every adversity. She was vain, and so made sure nobody ever knew when she was hurting. And she expected that from everyone around her. She just couldn’t hear that she was wrong.

Nobody liked her.

To others, it looked like she succeeded effortlessly, only to then turn around and berate anybody who struggled at the same tasks. And she never apologized, not for anything. She was cold, pampered, and heartless.

Some people saw through to the real Claire, of course. They recognized how hard she worked when no one was watching. But because she couldn’t be vulnerable, recognition was all they could offer. *Claire*, these well-meaning

individuals would say, *I see the real you, but nobody else will*. Still, she refused to change. She saw nothing wrong with her mother's words, nor with her own philosophy. This was working for her. Why change?

By the time she came of age, everyone was sick of her and no one would have her as a bride. The topic of marriage was broached on a number of occasions—she was the eldest daughter of the House of Latria, after all—but when interested noblemen met her and saw her hardness and her stubbornness for themselves, they ran screaming.

“If I cannot find a husband then I shall simply become a nun,” declared Claire when she was eighteen years old. She was a lady of the House of Latria. Becoming a nun was preferable to bringing shame on the family name by becoming an old maid. In Millis, it was a common path for young women in those days.

Claire Latria was harsh to herself and harsh to everyone around her. And that was, basically, all there was to her.

There lived a boy named Carlisle Granz. Carlisle was a fresh addition to the Temple Knights who served as a member of the Sword Company under the direct command of Ralkan Latria, Claire's father.

One day, Claire's father came home drunk. Ralkan himself was a rigid man. That was the only side Claire or her mother saw of him. It was therefore highly out of character for him to come home drunk. Out of character in the sense that it was incongruous, but not in the sense it was rare. Claire's mother knew the routine whenever he came staggering in. She removed his armor, gave him water to drink, and helped him to bed, so that the servants would only think him tired. She never told him off for it. She knew how stressful the job of a Temple Knight could be.

He was unlucky on one particular occasion, however. Claire's mother had gone to visit her parents and was away from the house. So, for the first time, Claire faced her father's failings without her mother there to protect him. She admonished him bitterly.

I can't believe you would do this. Aren't you the head of the Latria family?

Was everything you taught me empty words to you?

Her father was drunk, but he was nevertheless shamed into silence that he had allowed his daughter to see him like this.

Instead, the young knight who had accompanied him home spoke. This was Carlisle.

“I can explain why the captain was drinking today,” he said. “One of our knights was killed on duty. It was no one’s fault, but we went out to drink to their memory. The captain only drank too much because he felt remorse for the death of his subordinate. I won’t stand here and see him insulted for that, even by his own daughter.”

Claire didn’t reply. She didn’t know what to say. Her anger had disappeared.

She took care of her father in silence. She gave him water, and allowed him to lean on her shoulder as he tried to apologize to her. She couldn’t support him alone, however, so Carlisle ended up helping her to walk her father back to his room, change him out of his armor, and put him to bed.

Throughout the whole process, Claire didn’t utter a single word. She knew she was in the wrong, but she couldn’t bring herself to apologize to her father, nor to Carlisle. She was too stubborn for that. But Carlisle understood. He saw that beneath her sullen expression, she recognized her mistake.

As he left, he said, “You’re kinder than you think you are.”

At that time, Claire had no idea what he meant. All she knew was that this boy, perhaps a year or two younger than herself, had recognized something inside of her.

After that, Carlisle began to receive frequent invitations to the Latria estate, and soon enough he and Claire were married.

Claire and Carlisle had five children together: one boy and four girls. Claire raised the girls as severely as her own mother had raised her. Their eldest son joined the Temple Knights. Their eldest daughter married a marquess. They were the perfect gentleman and lady, exactly as Claire had desired; she would

have proudly presented them anywhere in Millis.

Claire had the highest hopes for her second daughter, who was born a little later. This daughter was far more accomplished than the first two children. Everyone who met her was struck by her beauty and her integrity. She was Claire's finest work, her pride and joy: Zenith Latria. But Zenith left. She dashed all Claire's hopes, running away to become an adventurer. And then silence.

Claire was apoplectic with rage. She cursed Zenith in front of her other children, calling her an idiot child who had made the stupidest choice imaginable, and warned them to refrain from emulating their sister in any way. It was the first time she had ever let her feelings show so openly. The daughter she'd pinned her highest hopes upon had chosen the grubbiest life she could imagine.

In all her life, this was the shock that hit Claire the hardest.

The fate of their third daughter Saula similarly diverted from Claire's wishes. Saula married a baron, but he became embroiled in a power struggle which he lost. Saula was killed in the aftermath. Millis's healing magic was highly advanced and so such deaths were rare. Her death was one of those rare flukes.

The family put the reputation of the House of Latria on the line to ensure that Saula's killer met a poetic end.

Claire mourned her daughter. She mourned as any other mother would have.

And while she mourned, her fourth daughter Therese chose a life Claire wouldn't have chosen for her—she joined the Temple Knights.

Claire cursed her fourth daughter as she had her second: "You little fool! Do you really think you have what it takes to be a knight? If only you had listened to me and learned to be a proper lady, I would have found you a good husband. You could have been happy."

Therese retorted, "Did dying in a power struggle make my sister happy?"

It had turned into a terrible fight.

Claire turned Therese out, telling her, "You will never set foot in this house again!"

Never for a moment did she think that she had done anything wrong. Zenith and Therese had both left, but someday they would crawl back for forgiveness. She earnestly believed that.

Ten years passed. No word came from Zenith, but Therese did well in the Temple Knights and was promoted to captain of the Blessed Child's personal guard. Claire thought the Knights only handed the position to Therese because the Blessed Child was also female. She wasn't wrong. Therese was an excellent administrator and commander, but no more than an average knight. Even so, at all the parties Claire accompanied her husband to, she heard people saying, "The Latrias are really something. Everywhere you look they're moving up in the world!"

Claire tore into others, but she was equally hard on herself. When she did realize that she had made a mistake she never apologized, but she was capable of changing her mind. Now that the daughter who'd made a terrible mistake was now being celebrated, she was left with no choice. Claire forgave and reconciled with Therese.

The words she used when she faced her daughter, however, were not an apology but a haughty, "I forgive you."

Now, Therese was accustomed to dealing with difficult people on a daily basis as a Temple Knight. If not for that practice, and if her older brother (who knew what Mother was like) had not physically stepped between them, there would have been another fight.

Even this experience didn't make Claire consider forgiving Zenith. She did think, however, that if Zenith ever showed up at the gate, she might speak to her again.

It was a few years later when Paul arrived at the Latria estate to ask for their help. A magical calamity had struck the Kingdom of Asura: The Fittoa Displacement Incident. Paul was the captain of a search and rescue team hunting down those who had gone missing, and he had come to request the assistance of the House of Latria.

When Claire learned that Zenith was among the missing, she agreed without

hesitation. She persuaded Carlisle to contribute both gold and men. Her hope was that they would find Zenith quickly and she could tell her, “Do you see now? Do you see what happened because you didn’t do as I said?”

But Zenith stayed missing. A year passed, then two, and there was still no sign of her. Zenith’s husband, Paul, wasted away. He made no effort to conceal his suffering, and although he had a young daughter, he began to drown his sorrows in drink.

Claire was the first to decide that something must be done for Norn. She decided to take her infant granddaughter from her father and foster the girl herself. She would bring her up as a proper young lady. That, Claire thought, was the most important thing. Carlisle was against it, however, and so she ultimately failed to tear the girl away from her father. As the days went by Claire could do nothing but watch Norn and stew in her own frustration.

Then one day, Paul reformed himself. Therese reported that his eldest son Rudeus had shown up, beaten him, and made him mend his ways. This sparked within Claire a flicker of curiosity about this Rudeus. This flicker was doused quickly; when the boy didn’t present himself to the Latria family, she decided that he was cut from the same cloth as his father and wrote him off in disgust.

It then came to light that Paul had two wives.

His lover Lilia and her daughter Aisha came to Millis. Claire belonged to the Millis Church, and thus could not countenance the perversion of keeping two wives. But Paul was not an adherent, and Claire knew it was foolish to try and press her own religious convictions on another. She permitted the two girls to call upon her a few times a month and instructed them in the Latria family customs: proper etiquette and painstaking rituals. Claire felt she was doing the natural thing by teaching them the correct way of living.

Norn was constantly sulking because she was unable to measure up to Aisha. Claire despised the girl’s attitude. She always gave up and refused to try at things she could undoubtedly achieve with sufficient effort. But Norn, afraid of being second to Aisha, stopped trying. Claire saw what was happening and told Norn that there was no need for her to be the best. She needed only to live up to the reputation of a lady of the House of Latria. This was Claire’s version of

motivation. Norn did not improve. Claire tried every speech she could think of to motivate the girl, but nothing worked.

Meanwhile, she was infuriated to see Aisha, the bastard daughter, teasing Norn. Her anger made her unreasonable, and she was cruel to both the girl and her mother. In the end, both Aisha and Norn left her house as disappointments.

Another few years slipped away without any news of Zenith's safe return. Claire was left with only the memories of her time with her grandchildren. Her eldest son and eldest daughter's children came of age one by one. They all turned out splendidly. Young people she could present in any situation with surety and confidence.

There were no longer any children in Claire's life, and she stopped seeing much of her grandchildren. She wondered how Aisha and Norn fared. The two would soon come of age. Now that she thought about it, they were the only two grandchildren who hadn't turned out as she'd hoped. Perhaps that was to be expected of Zenith's children. She wondered how on earth Zenith had raised them...and then it hit her. She hadn't raised her own daughter. The Displacement Incident had occurred just after the girls had been born. Norn had been one, maybe two years old. Zenith had been robbed of the chance to know her daughters as a real person. Norn had been raised by a single father. The Displacement Incident could explain why Aisha had never learned to properly respect her father's legitimate daughter.

Zenith had been wayward, but she was clever. Once upon a time, people had called her the model of a young lady of Millis. Adventurer or not, things could have been different if only Zenith had been there to teach them...

Claire missed Zenith so much that sometimes it made her soppy. She wanted to see her daughter. Claire knew she would probably have nothing but barbed words for her if they did meet, and that Zenith would likely cause nothing but grief for her, but even then. That might be worth it.

That was when it happened. That was when the message came from Rudeus. Zenith had been found. Her memory was gone, and she had lost her mind, but she was alive.

The letter from Rudeus was brief and to the point, stating the facts of where

Zenith had been found and her condition. It was so economical that it skimmed right past Paul's death. Rudeus wrote that he planned on getting Zenith treated, but he made no mention of bringing her home.

Claire wrote back immediately. She wanted to see Zenith more than anything.

Several more years passed, during which Claire searched for a way to cure Zenith. She went around the doctors and healing magicians of Millis, and visited the library of the Millis Church time and time again. She even stooped to studying texts written by demons in her research. It was unpardonable, but Claire was convinced that there must have been other cases like Zenith's in history.

Then finally, she found one. She had no idea if what she read could be trusted. The case described was suspect, unbelievable, and utterly nauseating. But a method *did* exist. There was precedent for a cure.

The cure she found was not a demonic one. She read that once there had lived an elf who suffered from a similar condition to Zenith. This elf woman lost her mind, but eventually returned to herself...after having intercourse with dozens of men.

Claire could scarcely believe it. It couldn't be true. She could certainly never try it. But as she continued her research to try and find the basis for the story... she found that the elf woman really existed. And that she was still, even now, sleeping with hordes of men.

Claire didn't know what to do. Could she really attempt such a treatment? Wouldn't Zenith hate it? And yet, and yet. It may be her only chance of recovery.

While she sat paralyzed by indecision, Rudeus brought Zenith to her.

Just three of them came. Zenith, her son, Rudeus, and the bastard daughter Aisha. It had been three years since Claire sent her letter. Claire was unaccustomed to communicating with faraway places, and so she believed that Rudeus had come as fast as he could.

First, she thought, she would tell him how much she appreciated him coming

so far, then make her introductions. After that, she would inquire after Zenith's recovery and ask how he intended to proceed with treatment. If there was time, she would ask after Norn and Aisha.

But the moment she saw Zenith, her plan went out the window. When Claire entered the room and saw her daughter's face, she went straight to her, close but never close enough. She saw Zenith's unfocused eyes, and then—feeling as though her heart would burst from her chest—she sighed impatiently and called for Ander, the family doctor. Ander was looking after Claire, whose health had been poor lately. He had counseled her on treatment for Zenith. Claire, after finally seeing Zenith for the first time in so many years, knew it was rude to ignore Rudeus, and turned around to give him her attention. Then she saw who was sitting on a corner of the sofa. A woman in a maid outfit, with dark brown hair, and a face Claire would never forget. Right then her attention was more caught by the outfit, though.

A maid outfit?

"Aisha, how lovely to see you again. What, er... What capacity have you come here in?"

"Oh! Um, I'm Lady Zenith's, um, I mean, I'm helping look after her."

Claire couldn't help the harsh words that slipped out of her at this response. *Look after her?* In other words, Aisha was here as Zenith's maid. And if that were true, there was no possible excuse for Aisha to sit while her master and mistress stood. Claire merely reprimanded her to remind her of common decency. Rudeus, however, came between them. As well the boy should. Claire herself was the one who had abandoned propriety.

Now that she saw Rudeus for the first time, she noted his strong resemblance to Paul. She couldn't help but see Paul's face in his. Paul, the drunk. Paul, who'd led Zenith to this state. All her resentment toward the boy's father came rushing back. Perhaps that was why, in the conversation that followed, Claire's less admirable qualities reared their heads. Her vanity and stubbornness took the reins. She brushed aside the dim awareness of her own faults and dug in.

Rudeus, on the other hand, was a forthright young man. He met her spiteful comments with well-reasoned and direct arguments. His frank candidness made

Claire revise her opinion of him. After that, their conversation proceeded according to her expectations. First they spoke of the progress of Zenith's treatment, then Norn's situation. She did not ask about Aisha, still embarrassed over her earlier outburst. Rudeus's knowledge of basic Millis customs was a little lacking, but he seemed aware of his responsibility as head of his family and was taking Norn's cultivation seriously. Claire began to see him in a different light. He was young, but he took his role seriously. He was an upstanding young man. At least, that was how he looked to her. She had no notion of how important the role of 'the Dragon God's subordinate' was. Her knowledge of military matters was lacking, but close ties to the monarch of Asura had to imply a certain degree of status, even if a new line had taken the throne. With greater status came greater responsibility, and greater accomplishments. Claire gleaned that Rudeus was a figure of far more importance than she had previously thought.

This was Zenith's son. The thought called up a complicated mix of irritation and pride within her.

Unfortunately, he'd be a problem.

The course of treatment she had planned for Zenith was sure to cause talk. Handing a woman over to a procession of men to have their way with her was an unforgivable sin.

She tried to ask leading questions to probe Rudeus's likelihood of accepting her plan, but in the end only made him explode with rage at her. Claire saw that his love for Zenith, even in her current state, was undiminished. But of course it was. Nothing else could have made him brave the years-long journey to bring Zenith to Millis. Claire's probing also confirmed that he hadn't tried the treatment she planned and didn't know of its existence.

She wondered whether she ought to tell him about it. To explain that while it might strain credulity, it might get Zenith back. It was even possible that if she explained it all, he might give her his consent.

But something gave her pause. This was a young man with a bright future ahead of him. Word had it that he was a close friend of a priest in the pope's faction. She had also heard that the pope's grandson had returned to Millishion

recently himself. Given the length of the journey, she wouldn't be surprised if he and Rudeus had made the journey together. Claire herself had no interest in church power struggles, but what if Rudeus began to work on behalf of the pope's faction? What if he made his name in Millishion not as a Latria, but as a Greyrat and follower of Orsted—a member of the papalists? The treatment Claire was planning could ruin his prospects. If it got out that he had done such a thing to his own mother, it would be a scandal. Every citizen of Millis would gossip behind his back. It would be impossible for him to remain in the country.

So, Claire debated with herself, was it right to tell him? Was it right to burden him with it?

No. He had to know nothing. It was better for him to stay ignorant about his mother being forced to sleep with all those men. Better he had nothing to do with it at all.

It would all be Claire's decision. Rudeus wasn't a member of the Latria family, and so he had nothing to do with it. That, she thought, would be best. She never considered giving up carrying out the treatment. She had waited *twenty years* for this—for the opportunity to see Zenith again, to speak to her.

Thus, Claire set her plan in motion. She would bear the disgrace of this by herself.

She deliberately antagonized Rudeus, then disowned him from the Latria family. Finally, she had a servant abduct Zenith.

At this point, however, her plan ground to a halt. Zenith was brought back to the house. She was an adult now, and she was getting older, but she was still beautiful. She was still a desirable lady. Most of all, she was Claire's daughter.

Claire couldn't bring herself to force Zenith to sleep with some untold number of men. It wasn't right. It couldn't be. At the same time, though, it wasn't right to expect Zenith's son to continue to care for his mother in her current state. Claire even made excuses to herself: if Zenith could speak, she would ask Claire to cure her. Surely.

The way she justified herself disgusted her.

She wanted someone to stop her. She was about to do something terrible,

but she couldn't stop herself. She wavered, agonized, and fought with herself. She spent every day in Zenith's room, her face buried in her hands.

Zenith sat there blankly, not doing anything. Every now and then, though, she would display a human reaction and Claire would be wracked with indecision once again.

In the end, it was Carlisle who put an end to her suffering. Carlisle heard a summary of events from Therese, then got the rest from the family doctor, Ander. He learned what the treatment was, and how Claire was agonizing over whether to go through with it. When he learned of the unforgivable act his wife was considering, he went to her, and he was kind.

"Before you go through with this," he told her, "first allow the Blessed Child to see her." If they knew Zenith's memories, that might shed new light on the situation. It might be what steeled their resolve. Or maybe it would be the thing that would finally allow them to let go.

Carlisle submitted an application to have Zenith's memories read by the Blessed Child. He wielded all the influence he could muster as a senior captain in the temple knights to procure an audience while keeping Zenith's name off the application. He made sure Rudeus didn't catch wind of it.

The Blessed Child—who officially never examined personal memories—would do exactly that for them that very day. As Carlisle and Claire quietly escorted Zenith to the church headquarters to see the Blessed Child, Rudeus abducted her.

Rudeus

"AND THAT IS HOW we ended up here," Carlisle finished. Claire's eyes were red, and Carlisle's face was lined with sorrow.

There were a few different reactions from around the table. A few grimaces, a few frowns and folded arms. Therese had her hands over her mouth in shock. The Blessed Child smiled as though she'd known the details all along. Cliff's face

was unreadable, which made me wonder if maybe he'd heard this story before somewhere.

It all made perfect sense now that I'd heard it. What Claire had planned was unforgivable. She hadn't gone through with it, but the fact she'd even thought about doing that to her own daughter was enough. I wasn't about to forgive her for it, and it sure as hell wasn't a cultural difference, or acceptable under Millis Church doctrine. I wasn't sure if it actually constituted a crime in Millis, but from the reactions I was seeing here she'd definitely succeeded in disgracing the House of Latria.

If I'd abetted her, it hardly needed to be said that I'd have kissed goodbye to any hope of doing business in this town. And that was why she disowned me. Why she tried to do it all herself. She struggled over the decision alone and planned to take all the punishment alone.

The thing, though, was that Claire had her facts wrong.

"Was that, um, treatment...was it from two hundred years ago, by any chance?" I asked.

Claire looked up in surprise. "It...it was!" she said. "Around two hundred years ago, it said, there was a woman in the same state..."

"And that woman was driven away from her village for what she did?"

"You know the story... Does that mean you *tried* it?"

"Of course not," I said. The other case Claire had found had to be Elinalise. The story Claire knew was a pretty generous massaging of the facts, of course. Yes, Elinalise had been in the same state as Zenith, but after a few decades, she got better. It wasn't until later that she turned into a total slut.

To be fair, it's in the nature of old stories to get mixed up as they get passed down. It makes sense that it got twisted in the retelling.

"I didn't try that 'treatment,'" I went on, "but I did meet that woman and heard her story directly."

I guess I hadn't put Elinalise in my letter. I'd kept way too much secret back then.

"I...I see," Claire said. Her shoulders slumped like she'd been deflated. In her face, though, I thought I saw something like relief. "Everything I did was for nothing, then..."

"Yep," I agreed.

"...I see."

If she'd told me her plans way back on day one, I wouldn't have gotten so mad.

Whoa there, Grandma, I'd have said, laughing her off. I know the woman you're talking about and you've got the whole story wrong. How could you think that would work?

Yeah. I mean, probably.

"You should've *told* me," I said.

"If you hadn't known any other way to make her better, would you have been able to resist trying it?"

I didn't reply. I didn't know how to answer. I couldn't just say "no." If Elinalise had told me, "Screwing around cured me," I might have done it. But not right away. I would have tried anything else first. But a few years had passed since I met Elinalise. If nothing had worked, how would I feel now? After dwelling on it for years, who knew what decision I might have reached?

"To think, you *knew*, and still I... Of all the foolish..." Claire began to cry again.

After finding out she'd tried to subject her daughter to horrible abuse for nothing, maybe she never wanted to see her again. Maybe there was still some bad blood there. Maybe she still had some mixed emotions.

Me, though—I felt great. Everything Claire had said and done finally made sense. When she said, "For the good of my daughter and my family," Claire had been telling the truth.

And now here we were. And this huge production was because our falling-out got picked up and used to gain the upper hand in a power struggle. Claire did her best to keep everyone else unaware of (and therefore not involved in) her plan, to her credit. I guess she wanted to protect the Latria family from disgrace

—Therese, and the uncle and aunt I still hadn't met. But she'd gone about it all wrong. There just wasn't another side to this. There had to have been a better option. All *kinds* of better options.

Even so, she'd done it for Zenith. And for me.

For the good of my daughter, and my family. I guess that was why Zenith slapped me and Carlisle.

I sighed. Then I remembered Cliff. Cliff, who'd tried to protect Claire.

"So, Cliff, when did you first hear about all this?" I asked.

"This morning. I ran into the three of them when they arrived at the church this morning," he replied.

"...And you didn't try to stop them then? You know all about Elinalise, don't you?"

"The only thing they told me about the treatment was that it was something no decent person would condone."

Hm, all right. I guess that follows. After all this time confiding in no one, Claire wasn't about to just spill the entire thing to Cliff.

"I meant to tell you today, but then..." He trailed off. "I'm sorry."

Then all this went down, and you never had the chance.

This was Cliff we were talking about. I was prepared to bet he really laid into Claire and Carlisle. *What you're doing is wrong. Return Zenith and apologize to Rudeus.* That sort of thing. Then Carlisle, cowed by Cliff's anger, confessed. Cliff probably felt uneasy at "something no decent person would condone." Maybe they made him swear confidentiality.

That was why here, in front of all the others, he'd tried to argue with me instead of saying any of this out loud. He thought that if he could just stop things here, if he could get it through to me that Claire really had Zenith's best interests at heart, there'd be the chance for reconciliation.

I couldn't exactly say it was a *good* plan... Still, it was drafted out of consideration for Claire and Carlisle. It was Cliff, through and through.

The important thing here was that I had all the pieces at last. Talk about a relief.

Just as I was feeling good about things, Cliff looked around the whole room and said, “All right, allow me to ask again. We heard that all of this came down to a mother trying to help her daughter. Do you still mean to claim that ganging up on this woman to use as a scapegoat in your schemes is the will of Saint Millis?”

The pope wore his ever-friendly smile. The cardinal still looked sulky. The Cathedral Knights and the Temple Knights looked relieved, if anything. All eyes were on Cliff.

“This incident was all a big misunderstanding,” he continued. “Fortunately, not one person was killed. This affair all started with a mother’s love. I admit, time was wasted and losses were sustained in the confusion that ensued. Some of you have suffered temporary discomfort or injury. But is any of that so important? Can’t we let bygones be bygones? Can’t we forgive this woman, show some mercy?” Cliff looked at me. “Rudeus, the power to decide is yours. You have suffered the most here, and you have won the right.”

I let go of the Blessed Child ages ago, I thought. But she was still sitting beside me, and still smiling like nothing she’d heard had surprised her. Like she was a *real* smarty pants, seeing through it all.

“That sounds fair to me,” I said calmly. There was still some bad blood between us, but I’d make time to have a good, long chat with Claire later. If she was the person I thought she was, we should be able to sort that out if we talked it out. She’d probably do something to irritate me along the way, but that was a normal part of knowing people.

“However, I have three conditions,” I said, then laid out my demands: “First, I want the Blessed Child to look at my mother’s memories and see if she can fix her.” I addressed this to the cardinal, but it was the Blessed Child who replied.

“Of course I will. We already had it scheduled, after all.” She still had that knowing attitude. Had she known she was going to examine Zenith today? Did she let herself get kidnapped because she knew, then manipulated this meeting? It was plausible.

“However,” she added, “I do not have the power to restore lost memories. I doubt that it will be within my abilities to cure her...”

“Even so, I’d like to try it. No objections from you, Your Eminence?”

The cardinal made a noise of assent. He seemed to be in a good mood. Probably because he saw his allies, the Latrias, were getting out of this more or less scot-free.

“Second, in exchange for my letting all this go, I expect your full and unqualified cooperation with the Dragon God Orsted.”

“It shall be so,” the pope said.

He was a given, but the cardinal nodded too and muttered, “Fine.”

I might even be able to demand the Ruijerd figures, I thought. Part of me wanted to try it, but I decided it was better to wrap up on a positive note. Things were fine for now. If I got greedy, it’d bite me in the butt later.

“Now, my third and final condition,” I said. I looked over at Claire and Carlisle. They stood still as stone, staring back at me. “I ask to be reinstated as a member of the Latria family.”

This was how the Millis incident drew to a close: the first to react was Therese. Her hand went to her breast and she gasped. Carlisle lowered his head, looking ashamed, and Claire started crying with big, hiccupping sobs. She was saying something that could have been “thank you” and could have been “I’m sorry.” It was hard to tell through the sobs. As Claire wept, Zenith laid a hand on her head.

Chapter 7:

What is Owed

WE PUT THE AGREEMENT in writing. It spelled out everything that had happened, the whole sordid affair, and it said only Rudeus's good character had kept the Blessed Child from harm. It placed the blame with the Millis Church, and stipulated that in accepting liability, the Holy Millis Church would make restitution by comprehensively supporting the activities of the Dragon God Orsted and Rudeus Greyrat. The contract wrapped up with something along the lines of: *the pertaining "activities" may involve demons, but shall not extend to any act that violates the laws of Millis.*

The two principal culprits, the pope and the cardinal, signed it like it was no big deal. The nervous sweat rolling down the cardinal's face was honestly kind of adorable.

The contract was signed, my hostage returned, and the gathering concluded.

Apparently, the decision reached by our provisional court would later be reviewed by an evaluation council that would assign liability to all the relevant parties. Whatever that involved, I bet the cardinal would find a way to wriggle out of it. Chasing down the guilty wasn't my job. If they weren't disciples of the Man-God, they weren't my enemies, just annoyances. Also, taking out the cardinal wasn't the same thing as wiping out the Demon Expulsionists. I'd gotten what I came for and sorted out the attack in the garden. Call that a win.

Zenith and Cliff and I set out for his place.

On the way, Cliff blurted out, "I'm sorry."

"Wait, what are we talking about?" I replied, a bit lost.

"When I thought about it, I realized it's my fault Zenith remained captive as long as she did," he said. "I wasn't careful enough. Everything worked out in the end, but I feel like I just made it worse by thinking I could smooth everything over."

Isn't that your whole schtick? You use a bunch of mistaken assumptions to make a big, logical speech, but in the end, everyone ends up happy. This is who you are as a person, Cliff.

"I'm not holding it against you. Let's try to learn from this, so we can do better next time."

"Yes. Of course," he replied. Cliff was feeling down...but personally, I was more worried about what this was going to do to his career.

Wendy was waiting for us when we got home. Just Wendy, alone.

"Oh, welcome home!" she said. I was struck by sudden unease. Were Aisha and Geese all right?

When the contract was being written up, I'd tried to casually ask after them, but the cardinal and the Temple Knights had basically said "Don't know, don't care."

"Miss Aisha and Master Geese are both safe and sound!" Wendy continued, and my paranoia evaporated. The two of them came up from the basement.

"Big Brother, you're back! And...and oh, Mother Zenith!"

The two of them told me what had happened. They got word that Claire and Carlisle had left the house early that morning to go to the church headquarters, so they headed to the church headquarters themselves to try and tip me off. By the time they got there, though, it was already too late. The Temple Knights were in an uproar; Claire was at the church. I was there too, trying to get close to Therese. They put two and two together and assumed we'd run into each other and clashed. At that point, they remembered the orders I'd given them and went back to Cliff's house. They got our things packed for a quick escape, then hid in the back of the house. They planned to get out of the city when night fell.

"Those Temple Knights showed up a few times, but I sent them on their way this time!" Wendy said. She was doing her job properly now—a small mercy.

But the cardinal *had* tried to get to Aisha and Geese. What a nightmare.

"Anyway, you've got Mother Zenith back. Does that mean...?"

“Yeah. It’s all over,” I said. I told Aisha and Geese everything that had happened.

After I finished, Aisha sighed with admiration. “Big Brother, you’re like, totally the hero or something,” she said, her eyes sparkling. “Everyone is just screwing everything up then one day, *bam*, call to adventure, a stranger comes to town, then he mysteriously returns where he came from.”

Don’t be stupid, I thought. I’m not handsome enough to be the leading man.

We arranged to take Zenith back to see the Blessed Child the following day. Carlisle and Claire came to Cliff’s house by carriage to get us, and the five of us, Cliff included, set off together.

Inside the carriage, I had a chance to talk to Carlisle. He seemed majorly cut up about everything and kept apologizing to me. I wasn’t interested in pointing fingers. Maybe he could have handled things a bit better, but hey... People make mistakes. The important thing is that you learn from them, so that you can do better in future, right? Besides, I couldn’t claim to be doing too well on that front. Who was I to start harping on at other people about their screw ups? How was anyone supposed to move forward if you kept digging it up? Not that it was my job to make sure any of them were moving forward.

Carlisle talked a lot, but Claire didn’t say anything. Jammed in with the other four of us in the carriage, she stayed silent the whole time.

What’s she thinking? Should I ask? I wondered. I was still going back and forth on the question as we arrived on church grounds.

After going through some official procedures, we were granted entry into the inner sanctum for the audience. We were escorted to a room that seemed to be the Blessed Child’s quarters.

A transparent barrier was set up in the middle of the room just like when I’d met with the pope. There were also two chairs and a window. Six guards stood at attention under the dim lights.

Therese wasn’t there. Maybe she’d been transferred. Regardless, it looked like the examination would happen with the Blessed Child’s fanboys standing by. They didn’t seem hostile. Just a little tense and unwilling to meet my eye.

I'm not looking for an apology, guys. It's your job, I get it, I thought.

Besides, I beat them all unconscious. They'd started it, and I'd finished it. We were even. They were probably going to see some professional consequences too, so I was happy to let things go. I hoped I could leave here with us on friendly terms, actually. I didn't like the idea of these guys holding a grudge against me.

"Shall we begin?"

The Blessed Child and Zenith sat down opposite each other. Dust gently supported Zenith's head, positioning her so she was still, her eyes open. Then, the Blessed Child leaned forward and gazed deep into Zenith's eyes. It reminded me of an optometrist's exam.

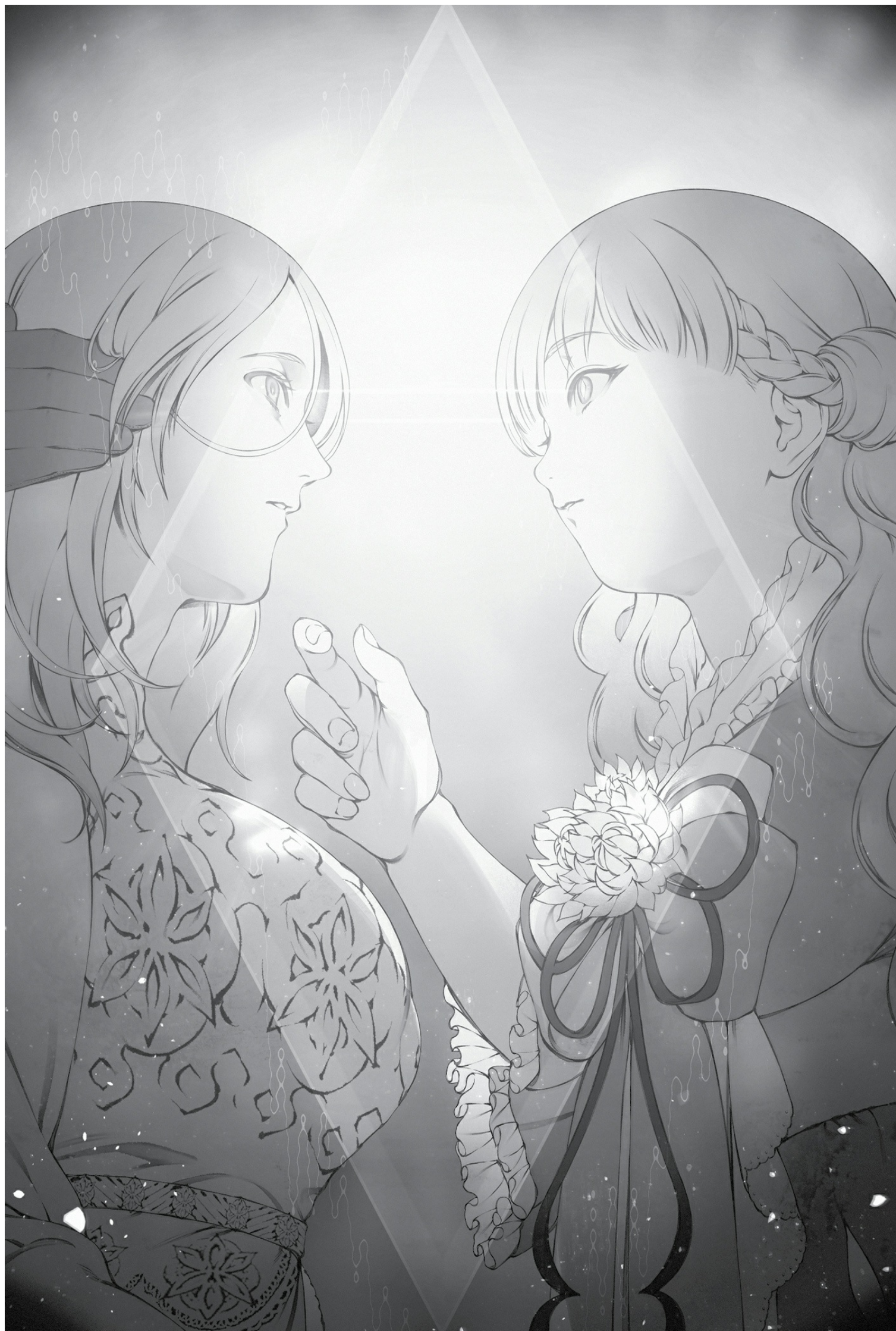
"...Whoa."

The Blessed Child's gaze *shone* as she gazed at Zenith. It literally shone. I can't think of a better way to put it. Faint threads of light connected them, eye to eye.

The otaku were all oohing and aahing over her.

"That's our Blessed Child..."

"She really is blessed..."



That light didn't appear before. Was she putting on a show? Or does it take effort?

Maybe it was like fire magic. As your magic gets stronger, the fire gets hotter and brighter. Maybe this phenomenon only happened when she was pushing her power to its limit. She'd switched from basic cable to fiber optic.

Claire clenched her fist over her heart, like she was praying. I tried to pull myself back on task. Right now, all of Zenith's past was being laid bare. The Blessed Child might even be able to see the memories that had been devoured by her magic crystal prison in the depths of the labyrinth. If Zenith's memories revealed the cause, maybe they could shed light on a solution.

Just one clue. One little clue might be enough for one of my brainier friends to think of something. Orsted, or Kishirika maybe.

"Oh," The Blessed Child said softly, then shivered. Dust released Zenith's head, then gently touched the Blessed Child's shoulder.

Does that mean 'download complete'?

The Blessed Child stood up, her eyes still wide open. She was looking straight at me.

"Rudeus Greyrat."

"Yes?" I replied. The use of my full name made me sit up straight.

"I have seen the memories of Zenith Greyrat."

"What did you see?"

"Until the Displacement Incident, she lived in the village of Buena in Fittoa, where she lent her services to the local healer while raising Aisha and Norn."

We're going all the way back to that? Okay, no, fair enough. She's got to go through everything in order or it'll sound like she's just talking at random.

"After you left, not a day went by that she didn't worry about you. She worried that you weren't eating properly, that you weren't doing your laundry, that you were chasing after lots of different girls..."

Oh wow, sorry, Mom. Least I didn't cheat on anyone!

The Rudeus Continent was a peaceful land...up until it was conquered by the bits below the waist. It even managed to hold off invading the unsuspecting Land of Sylphie for a while. Hard as that might be to imagine for anyone who knew of Rudeus's, uh, troop movements over the past few years.

"In the midst of her worries about you, her memories cut to white."

The Displacement Incident. I remembered that moment. Most people, though, were displaced before they realized what was happening, or why. That's what happened to Paul, and I heard the same was true for Lilia.

"For some time after that, only darkness."

"Uh... 'some time'?"

"Yes. It was as though she remained deep in a dreamless sleep as a great deal of time passed around her."

So she had no memories of that period. In which case she must have been sent straight into the labyrinth by the Displacement Incident. The chances of that happening had to be tiny...but it wasn't impossible. A random teleportation to anywhere in the world had a small chance of burying you inside of a wall. If you did it on purpose, set up an entry and exit circle in advance and so on, that would mostly eliminate that kind of risk...

The Displacement Incident had really blown our lives apart. It was apparently the aftershock of Nanahoshi arriving in this world, but that didn't really matter. It was all over and done with now.

If humanity hadn't made teleportation circles taboo and managed their use responsibly, if they'd only done that much, they'd have weathered this crisis without panicking.

I'll tell Ariel that next time. Ariel will get things worked out if I write up a report on teleportation for her.

...Wait.

How did Geese find Zenith, then? He told me he went asking around and heard she was in the depths of the teleportation labyrinth...hold on.

"Then, she had a dream," the Blessed Child said. I refocused.

He's not even here right now. You can question Geese later.

"A dream?" I asked.

"A dream. She began to feel like she'd been turned into a rag doll."

"A rag doll...?"

"Still, it was a pleasant dream," the Blessed Child said, then closed her eyes. Her voice flowed on, as though she was watching a film play on the inside of her eyelids.

"She dreamt of living an easy life in a house she didn't know. She and Lilia sat in the sun and tended to the garden."

The Blessed Child's voice had subtly changed. She sounded like Zenith.

"Paul was gone, but Rudy and Sylphie got married, and then they had a baby. But then, well, like father, like son! Rudy went off with Roxy, then it was Eris—they just kept coming! But they all seemed happy at least. Even Sylphie.

"Norn moaned a lot, but she still went to school and kissed me goodbye every morning. Aisha and I are getting to be such good friends! Did you know she likes flowers? I tell her I like apples and daffodils and she turns to me and says, 'Miss Zenith?' You can call me Mom, I told her, but Lilia looked a bit unhappy at that. I guess she wants Aisha to see her as Mom too.

"Roxy is teaching at the local school. Norn says all the kids love her. She must be pretty old, given she's a demon... But oh, well. Rudy adores her, so I guess I shouldn't worry about age too much.

"I got to meet Eris for the first time. It was plain as day how much she loves Rudy. She came to see me when no one else was around, her face bright red, then said something like 'I'm... I'm still figuring stuff out, but... I'll do my very best.'

"Honestly, I just burst out laughing. I told her to try saying it to Rudy instead. There was no point being all formal around me. Then Eris went bright red again and bowed her head. It was the sweetest thing. She's always so bold, you know?"

Those were Zenith's memories of the past few years. They didn't quite match

up with mine. Norn hardly ever spoke to Zenith. And while Aisha talked to her in the garden frequently, Zenith never replied.

But does that mean that in Zenith's eyes... Did it feel to her like she was talking to everyone, and they were replying?

"Then, there's Rudy's children. Lucie is the most precious little thing. She's still so little, but she's doing her best to be a big sister. She listens so carefully to everything Sylphie says, and she practices her magic every day to show Rudy. With me, though, she doesn't act so tough. She says she's not as strong as her mama. She's hard on herself. I told her she has nothing to worry about. One day she'll be able to do it all, and even if not, she'll find her own talent. After that, she said she'd do her best. Oh, she's so sweet! Lara really likes me. You know she was talking from the moment she was born! She calls me over every little thing. Granny, Granny...she says, then next thing I know Leo comes over saying 'Miss Zenith, help! Miss Lara wet herself!'

"Lately, she climbs up on my knees and we sit in the sun with Leo and talk. About the countryside around the house, or about their daddy's hometown. That sort of thing.

"Arus loves breasts. Just like Rudy when he was little. Whenever I pick him up he grabs at mine and he looks so pleased with himself. I suppose even the breasts of an old granny like me will do! He's a little bit bad, just like Paul and Rudy. I told him if he's going to make all the girls cry like Rudy, he has to make sure they're all happy in the end too."

I realized my eyes were hot. Tears were streaming down my cheeks. Lucie hardly ever went near Zenith, and Lara couldn't talk. More than half of the scenes the Blessed Child described were just Zenith's delusions. Hallucinations playing behind her empty eyes. But the world she saw was so kind.

"Oh, I almost forgot! Rudy started working for this really amazing guy. The Dragon God Orsted, he's called. A distant apprentice of one of the three Demon Slayer Heroes, the Dragon God Urupen. He's supposed to be suuuper strong and suuuper scary. Everyone seems terrified of him, but he doesn't seem so bad to me. I think deep down he just wants to make friends. He's hung up on Rudy in particular. He keeps coming to see how our family is getting along. I talk to

him sometimes, but he doesn't seem very used to talking to people. He gets all tongue-tied. He's a good person, though. He teaches Lucie tricks to help her with her magic when she's struggling, though they're a bit complicated—I don't think she understands him very well.

“Once, I asked if he wanted to hold Lara. He was so nervous about it! But he was very careful when he took her. He's not so keen on Leo and Arus though, I think. The other day he made Arus cry, then left without greeting Eris. I wonder what sort of work Rudy is doing for this man who's so strong, and yet so kind. Whatever it is, I'm proud of him. I'm sure Paul would be too.”

How much of that is true? Orsted almost never comes to the house... Is he coming by without telling me?

“Rudy's grown up into such a wonderful young man. Norn and Aisha are grown up too now, and Sylphie had her second baby. Lilia was so worried, saying now she had that on top of looking after me! How silly. Obviously, the children come first. I'm going to visit my mother, so I'm leaving Sylphie to you, Lilia, okay?

“Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I used to be an adventurer, you know! We're going with Rudy and Aisha and Rudy's friend Cliff. Hah ha, I'm getting all excited, thinking about going on a trip with Rudy!”

Zenith's memories were approaching the present day.

“Mother has gotten so old. She's nothing like how I remember! I thought she'd yell at me for sure, but instead she comes up to me saying, ‘Zenith, oh, Zenith,’ and looking all weepy! She was worried I was hurt or unwell, so she brought a doctor to see me. I mean, as you can see I'm in perfect health! But Mother does like to worry. She brought the doctor in every day! She was always so hard on us, but now she looks at me like she might cry. She doesn't scold me at all.

“She comes by so often because she's worried. Oh, Dad came too. He's grown out his beard, can you believe it? He never used to wear it like that. When I asked him about it, he said he let it grow because he got promoted. It looks so awful on him, I have to laugh.”

I shot a glance at Claire and Carlisle. Claire had her face buried in his chest

while Carlisle stroked her hair. His eyes were brimming with tears.

“The only thing is, Mother doesn’t get on with Rudy at all. Rudy hates people looking down on him and telling him what to do. He and Mother got in a fight. I wish they’d find a way to make up... Then Rudy went and backed Mother right into a corner! Paul was always like that when we fought back in Buena. Rudy really doesn’t pull his punches... Well, I’ll just have to get them to make up!”

The Blessed Child’s eyes opened.

Is that the end, then?

“Whew,” she said, rubbing her eyes and exhaling, before she collapsed back into her chair. The otaku rushed to her side, one with what looked like hot towels, another with a glass of water. One started massaging her shoulders. It was like she was some ancient empress or something.

“My apologies. That was all I saw. Did you hear what you wanted?” the Blessed Child asked. She sounded wiped out. *Using that power really drains her, huh*, I thought.

I guess it would. She’d read through all Zenith’s memories, downloaded them into her own brain, then her brain had converted the whole thing into a little simulated Zenith monologue for us. Having all that information rush into your brain at once had to be exhausting.

For once, I thought maybe I should join the otaku. She deserved that shoulder rub.

“Yes, thank you,” I replied. I still didn’t know how to fix Zenith. But now I knew how she’d felt after becoming like this. Just knowing that made coming to Millis worth it.

“It may not mean much, but she is happy now,” the Blessed Child said. “She knows that Paul is dead, and she understands what is happening around her.”

She sure does, I thought. *She understands a lot more than I ever imagined*. It all still felt a bit dreamlike, and the Blessed Child’s voice had lent it this fairytale quality, but—I mean, she knew how many kids I had, and her description of their personalities had been pretty solid. Except for Lara, maybe. Lara did like Zenith, though. Maybe from Zenith’s point of view it looked like she was trying

to communicate.

“There was one more thing I learned,” the Blessed Child said. I looked at her questioningly. “Zenith... I don’t know how much she sees, but she can read minds.”

Read minds?

“Because of her current condition, she doesn’t always interpret what she reads correctly, and I think she may be filling in the parts she can’t read with her own stories...” The Blessed Child’s voice trailed off.

She beckoned to me, gesturing to me to bring my ear to her mouth. The otaku all immediately covered their ears and turned away.

I leaned in toward her. She whispered, “She is a Blessed Child.”

I nodded slowly. I’d known from the start that it was likely she was cursed. And I knew all too well that a Cursed Child and a Blessed Child were, in essence, one and the same.

“If this gets out, things will get out of hand again. I recommend you keep it safe,” she said.

“No question about that,” I agreed. “I’m a follower of Orsted. I’ll protect her, no matter what.”

“Total commitment... That’s who you are, isn’t it?”

I probably don’t need to tell her I go all out, given that I did try to kidnap her. But yeah. Those are the words I’m trying to live by.

I knew two things now. The first was that Zenith had power. She could read minds. It wasn’t clear how much she could read, but it probably wasn’t killing her. It was more like she didn’t know how to communicate what she saw. No immediate danger. I could relax a bit knowing that.

The second was that something was up with Geese. Some of what he’d told me didn’t fit, and honestly, his behavior throughout this whole incident had been a bit off. Going to the Latria estate even though he knew they favored demon expulsion, then blindly following Claire’s orders to bring Zenith out into the open. I needed to talk to him soon—today, if possible.

“Blessed Child, I’m really glad we met,” I said. “I’d like to thank you somehow.”

I still didn’t know how to get Zenith’s memories back—or rather, how to get her back to her old self—but I’d learned that things were nowhere near as bad as I’d feared. She was conscious, just dreaming. That meant that one day, she might wake up. And even if she didn’t, so long as she was happy like this, maybe that was okay.

“You are very kind. In that case, I do have two requests. May I make them?”

“Go ahead.”

“Will you give me that bracelet?”

“Bracelet?” I looked down and saw Orsted’s bracelet shining on my arm.

“Yes,” said the Blessed Child.

“Um, see... Thing is, I can’t take this off. Isn’t there something else?”

“Anything will do, so long as it identifies the bearer as a follower of Orsted at a glance.”

So long as it identifies the bearer as a follower of Orsted at a glance... Does she mean what I think she means...?

“You want to join Orsted?”

“I do. I would prefer to live past thirty.”

“Fair enough.”

That’s right, her destiny is weak. She’s fated to die unless something changes. She wasn’t in the best shape, but she didn’t seem especially sickly either. That left assassination as the biggest worry. Considering her power and the sheer number of schemes going on in the Millis Church, that was the likeliest cause. If she were under Orsted’s protection, though, the cardinal (who had a guilty conscience about this whole thing) and the pope (who thought I was on his side now) would find it a lot harder to move against her. Still, it wasn’t a guarantee.

Heh... All right, then let’s upgrade it to a guarantee.

“Okay, I’ll bring you something in the next few days,” I said.

“Oh, thank you! With that, I might even make it to fifty!” she replied.

She’d seriously helped me out at every turn. I wouldn’t bring her a meager mark of the Dragon God. I’d summon a guardian beast for her.

“What about the second thing?” I asked.

“I want you to get Therese off on a lighter sentence. Unless we do something, she’s going to be demoted and sent far away.”

“I mean, doesn’t she kind of have it coming?” I pointed out. *Not only was she ‘just following orders’ but she couldn’t even carry those orders out.*

“That’s not unfair. But you must understand, Rudeus, her loss to you was a rather humiliating defeat for the cardinal. If she is sent away, she will be killed. And I want *her* in my guard.”

I could see how the cardinal might kill her out of pure spite when she wasn’t useful anymore. But she stuck to her role as his henchman, and this is what happens to henchmen who fail...

Still, I couldn’t deny she’d done absolutely everything she could for Zenith. Death was a tall price to pay for following orders and being manipulated.

“All right,” I said.

“Thank you. May I have your signature?” One of the fanboys brought a document over to me. They were on top of everything, those guys.

“I do look forward to working with you in the future, Sir Rudeus,” she said.

And that’s the story of how the Blessed Child became a follower of Orsted.

“Rudeus.”

We were waiting for the coach in a side room when Claire addressed me. Her face was as stony as ever. That was just how she looked. Unless that was anxiety I was reading in her face?

“This is far from an appropriate place to discuss what I have to say,” she continued, “and I’d hoped to talk to you when things had calmed down somewhat, but you are sure to only grow more busy as time wears on. May we

“speak now?”

I nodded.

Is she mad at me for having three wives? Two was bad enough, but three! The Millis Church will never stand for such a thing!

“It’s regarding the mess I caused.”

“Okay.”

Huh, so it’s not about the wife thing. She wants to talk about herself. Fair enough. She wasn’t about to come chew me out for my life choices after what she tried to pull. That would be ridiculous. Duh.

Her expression remained firm as she went on. “I know that what I tried to do was unforgivable.”

“Yep,” I said.

It might have been for Zenith’s sake or whatever, but her treatment plan was way overboard. If she’d gone through with it, well...let’s just say we wouldn’t be chatting as amicably as this.

“I want you to punish me,” Claire said.

“P-punish...?”

“Yes. I stole Zenith from you, and I tried to do something utterly inhuman to her. I should be punished accordingly.”

“Can’t you just apologize?”

“What would that solve? Sins must be punished,” she insisted.

I saw where she was coming from. If *sorry* made everything better, there’d be no need for the police. Pretty much everyone who’d contributed to that mess had received some sort of punishment. But not Claire. And Claire herself wasn’t satisfied with that.

“Okay, then... What kind of punishment do you think you deserve?”

“You could beat me with a whip, or a staff, or cut my arms off. You could even kill me. I don’t care.”

Um... That's a bit much. I didn't want to become known as a grandma killer. Plus Zenith would be so mad at me.

"You heard what Zenith said in there. You saw how self-righteous I was, how little thought I gave to anyone else. You saw how she trusted me like a baby, and I was going to throw her into hell. Fools like me don't need to be pitied, only to be crushed by the hammer of justice."

Her hands were clenched into fists and shaking.

So that's what she heard back there. It sounded a little different to me.

Zenith forgave Claire. I don't think she knew what Claire planned, but she knew that Claire was suffering over some decision, and she knew it related to her. That was why, when she saw Claire trying to take all the blame herself back at the trial without anyone standing up for her, Zenith had forgiven her. Then, she'd slapped Carlisle and me, but not Claire.

Okay, maybe I'm twisting that logic a bit far. That's not how it went down either.

Maybe it was right that Claire received some kind of punishment. Claire herself seemed to want punishment more than forgiveness anyway, and she wasn't going anywhere until she got it. *Fine, then.*

"Well, okay... If you insist..." I said. Claire looked at me nervously.

Sorry, but if it's all the same to you, I'm gonna use this to my advantage.

"I want you to convert," I said.

"You mean to your religion? You want me to worship demons?"

Crap, that wasn't the right word. Not convert. I really don't want you joining the Roxy cult. How the heck do I explain this? Oh, well. I guess I can spell it out for her.

"No, sorry. That's not what I meant. You don't have to leave the Millis Church. I mean I want you to leave the Demon Expulsionists."

"The whole of the Latria family?"

"Just you would be fine with me. One of my wives is a demon, so I'd rather

you didn't call her 'filthy.' Also, I'd like you to recognize my religion and keep your opinions about my family to yourself."

Claire didn't reply.

"And one more thing. If you ever end up facing that sort of decision again, talk to me about it, okay? I have the power to solve most things... At least, I like to think so," I finished. Claire stared at me, shocked. But she nodded.

"Very well," she said.

She didn't look convinced. She probably wasn't sure if she'd actually been punished. Neither was I. I basically listed off everything I wanted from her and she interpreted it as a punishment.

She nodded, even so. I guess she decided that if this was my judgment, she'd go along with it.

"From this day forth, I, Claire Latria, shall be a demon integrationist and do everything in my power to assist that cause. I will trust in you, Rudeus, and make no comment on your religion or your educational methods, nor shall I permit such words from any other."

"Thank you..." I replied. "Just don't overdo it, okay? Pushing your thoughts on others never goes well."

"I understand."

If I could get the old bird to be a bit more flexible, then I could rest a whole lot easier. That way, I could know for sure that she wasn't going to start any fights with my wives or daughters. She was all obedient now, but what's the saying? *Vows made in storms are forgotten in calm...* When we met again...or rather *if* we met again, I really didn't want to get into another argument.

"That's all I have to say," I said.

"Thank you for your kindness," she replied curtly, then nodded.

Could you be any worse at apologizing? I thought. *Honestly...*

Right, so back to Cliff's place. I would probably have to show my face at the Latria estate later, but first I would deal with Geese. I had serious questions—about this trip and the last time we ran into him. When I thought back, I

realized that the guy had a real knack for showing up at *just* the right moment. I was fascinated. He was going to explain that trick to me.

“I’m heading out to go find Geese,” I said to Aisha and Zenith as I went to leave.

“Big Brother, hold up!” Aisha called out, rushing over to stop me with her hand outstretched. “Look at this!”

In her hand was a letter. It was sealed with wax, and on the outside was written *Rudeus*. “Wendy said that as soon as you left, Geese came by and left this!” Aisha explained. I took it without a word. A letter, right at this moment.

Oh, I had a bad feeling about this.

I broke the seal and began to read.

Rudeus,

Hey, Boss. If you came back to the house from talking to the Blessed Child and you’re reading this letter, well, you probably worked out what’s happened.

You have, yeah? Worked it out, I mean. There’s no way you haven’t. Right? If you haven’t I really messed up by writing this. But what the hell.

I reckon you’ve got some questions, right, Boss? Like how come I knew where Zenith was when there was no way I should? How come I took Zenith outside just at the right time?

This is going back a bit, but the time we first met was like that too. Quite the coincidence, me just running into you like that in Doldia village...

Well? How’d I do it? There’s some stuff even the mighty S-ranked adventurer Geese just shouldn’t be able to do!

How ’bout I tell you?

It was all thanks to the Man-God’s instructions. Everything I did, I was following the Man-God’s advice.

Basically I’m what you’d call a ‘Disciple of the Man-God.’ I was pulling one over on you, Boss.

Well? Surprised? Are you thinking 'I knew it'? Or are you pissed off?

Yeah, you're probably pissed. Ah well, that's only fair!

Just so you know, though, I've been hearing this god's voice since I was a kid. That voice got me out of some tough scrapes and a few near-death situations too boot. I'm weak. I can't get by on my own. That voice was my savior, y'know?

Wasn't it the same for you, Boss?

The Man-God helped you out when you came back from the Demon Continent. He brought you together with old Ruijerd, then made sure you got your hands on the Demon Eye. He got you out of that cell and saved your little sister's life. It was the Man-God who told me where to find Zenith too.

All of that. He did it for you, Boss.

You're a traitor.

What, did you have a little falling-out?

I know the Man-God isn't benevolent. All the advice he gives is just so He can use us for His own ends. We're like toys to him, honestly. I guess you think you're too important for that. Really got under your skin, huh? But betraying Him, smashing everything up—don't you think ya went too far? Okay, so He used you. But we owe Him everything. That's the only way this all makes sense.

That's how I saw it after my hometown got wiped off the map.

The Man-God manipulated me, then He wiped out my home. And He laughed about it! Told me all about how he'd played me. Of course I was pissed off! Like, what the fuck, dude?! What is wrong with you? Get screwed! I let him have it, y'know?

But this is what He told me.

"After everything I've done for you, this is nothing."

I reckon He meant to piss me off more, send me over the edge, you know? Drive me crazy, just so He could laugh at me.

But when He said that, it hit me like, wham.

He's right, I thought.

Thinking about what I owed Him after all the times He saved my ass, and I figured I could just...let it go. I mean, there's a little grudge underneath it all, but that's normal, ain't it?

Anyway, I reckon you don't get it, huh Boss? You're probably reading this like, 'Newbie, you are out of your mind.' And maybe it feels wrong to you. But not to me.

Far as I see it, you're turning your back on your debts. Biting the hand that fed you. So sorry, Boss, but I think I'm team Man-God now.

This time I was testing the waters, seeing what you were capable of. I got you right in my trap, then set the Temple Knights against you. Looks like you blasted straight through them in the end, but hey, now I know what doesn't work. You messed up. You showed me every trick you got. I'm off to get enough allies so I know I can beat you, then I'll be back to fight you head-on, fair and square. It's war, Boss. Plan your funeral.

I don't hate you or nothing. We had a good time back at the prison, and I'll never forget our journey on the Holy Sword Highway. The labyrinth hunt too! That was the most alive I'd felt in ages. I haven't forgotten any of that.

But that's as far as it goes. I don't hate you, but I don't owe you nothing. I might have my little problems with Man-God, but I owe him. Even when there's hard feelings, you gotta pay what you owe. That's a jinx for both of us, Boss.

Yours,

I sprinted out of the house.

“Geese!” I yelled as I ran.

Geese. *Geese* was my enemy. I didn’t know how, but he’d seen the Magic Armor. He said he was getting ready to face me.

How?

Next time, he’d fight me fair and square. Could I trust that? It didn’t matter. If that’s what he meant to do, I would stop him.

I had to kill him.

I kept running all the way to the Merchant District until I burst into the mercenary office. I immediately sent a message to Orsted about everything that had happened in Millis, the identity of the Man-God’s disciple, and the contents of the letter.

I wasn’t going to wait for an answer. I was going after Geese. One problem: I had no way of knowing where he’d gone. Working alone would be foolishly inefficient. I went back to the church and had them put out a warrant for Geese’s arrest. Then I went to the Temple Knights and demanded they send out search parties throughout Millishion and the surrounding area.

But Geese was a disciple of the Man-God.

He could see the future.

Geese. The guy who got to S-ranked with zero combat abilities.

There was no way in hell I was catching him.

Chapter 8:

The Traitor Gets Away

GEELSE NUKADIA. The last of the Nuka tribe. Weak point: combat. Strong point: everything else. Despite being hopeless with a sword and a dunce at magic, he persevered and managed to become an S-ranked adventurer.

That was the Geese who Orsted knew.

“Geese had always been consistent, regardless of my movements, and so I decided that he could not be a disciple...until now.”

That was how Orsted operated. He acted, watched how the world and the people in it reacted to him, then used that to identify the Man-God’s disciples or whatever else he was looking for. Orsted witnessed how history progressed when he intervened and when he did not, but in all the loops Geese’s actions stayed the same. Geese lived his life as an adventurer and died as an adventurer. Regardless of what happened around him, he’d never done anything to arouse Orsted’s suspicion.

Orsted was good at sniffing out the Man-God’s disciples. There weren’t a lot of disciples like Geese—not much good in a fight, specializing in collecting information and manufacturing disinformation—but they did exist. They kept to the shadows, carrying out their plans in the darkness, lending a helping hand to other disciples at crucial moments. These disciples were always careful not to reveal their true nature. Orsted killed all of them. He had the time loops. With enough repetitions, it wasn’t hard to work out who was a disciple and who wasn’t.

Geese alone was different. Geese alone failed to rouse suspicion; Orsted said that he had never been a disciple. No matter what Orsted did, he never acted like one. Not even when he was on the verge of being killed.

“But what that means,” Orsted told me, “is that he was a disciple in every loop, but hid it perfectly.”

Geese had never *admitted* to being a disciple in any previous loops. Orsted

had suspected and killed him before, but even moments from death, even with a knife at his throat, Geese never cracked.

“I deluded myself that this was the normal course of history... Hence these defeats.”

When we communicated through messages I could always tell when Orsted was feeling sorry for himself.

Orsted never so much as suspected that Geese was a disciple until my message. The Man-God had to be pissing himself laughing: *It still hasn't clicked for him! Pfeh heh heh!*

I think Orsted didn't consider Geese to be all that important at first, that was all.

“Still. You did well, Rudeus,” he told me. “He was the Man-God's trump card... but no longer.”

There couldn't be any other disciples like Geese, though. At the end of the day, Orsted had the loops and the Man-God didn't. The disciples acted more independently than you might think, anyway. Even if the Man-God wanted more disciples like Geese, acquiring them would be easier said than done.

Which meant Geese was more than likely the Man-God's last line of defense. The last disciple he'd kept hidden was *Geese*... I was still struggling to get my head around it.

Orsted thought he was just a few turns from an easy victory, now. Which... yeah. He had the time loops. Even if we screwed it up this run, though, he could just kill Geese in his New Game+. Then he'd be one step closer to victory.

The only thing was, if Orsted lost and went on to the next time loop, I only had this one. Game over.

“I want to win in *this* loop,” I sent back, anxiety balling in my chest.

Orsted's answer came: “I merely meant he's already played his trump card.”

I snorted. *Nice recovery, Orsted.*

A month had passed since Geese had outed himself as the Man-God's disciple.

Afterward, I tried to find him. With the help of the knight orders, we hunted for him up and down the Millis Continent. The Millis Church and the Latrias went out of their way to lend us a hand and the search was still ongoing. It seemed likely, though, that he'd gotten away clean.

Needless to say, I wasn't only focusing on Millis. I got in touch with the Doldia tribe straight away and got them to put out a wanted notice for the Great Forest. I also notified Ariel and had her do the same in the Asura Kingdom, then asked Roxy to put in a request in the Ranoan Kingdom.

Even then, I was pretty sure we wouldn't catch him. From the south and northeast of the Central Continent, to the Begaritt Continent, to the Demon Continent and the Divine Continent, it was a big world. There were lots of places my influence didn't reach. I didn't even know which way he'd fled. North? West? If he had contacts in the King Dragon Realm, then that would mean he'd gone to the Demon Continent for sure. But after the death of the king, that place was a bit of a mess. The Demon Continent was broad, and Geese could blend in there. Maybe he'd used a teleportation circle I didn't know about, and then he could literally be anywhere.

Geese, gone completely to ground. I felt ill. Honestly, I'd hoped we might catch him right away. Eventually, though, I had to accept that wasn't happening and start thinking about how to protect myself. In his letter, Geese said that next time, he was going to fight me fair and square. Ridiculous. This was Geese; he lied as easily as breathing. What am I, a sucker?

But then again.

When I looked back, I realized that Geese could easily have killed me at any time in Millis. I let my guard down around him. I'd trusted him. But he hadn't done it. All he'd done was try to trick me into falling into his trap, and even after the trap fell apart, he still didn't move on me. Hell, he could have taken Aisha as a hostage. Aisha could defend herself with a sword and magic, so he might have thought that was biting off more than he could chew, but he'd had the opportunity. Yet he didn't do it.

Maybe I *could* trust the letter. Maybe, despite the fact that he was working on the Man-God's orders, Geese himself wanted to fight fair and square.

When you gotta kill someone, you better play fair or you'll mess it up. That felt like one of Geese's jinxes, right?

But I could be wrong. He might want me to think that while actually plotting the opposite. For all I knew he was actually hiding out in a cupboard in Cliff's house, waiting to slit my throat with a poison knife when I fell asleep.

Imagining guys in the walls isn't helping.

I hadn't been attacked yet, which meant Geese hadn't gathered his forces in advance. He was probably out there somewhere right now, gathering allies. He was coming for me, but not yet.

That was what I tried to tell myself. In reality, I couldn't shake the feeling that I might get attacked at any moment.

I was scared.

Now, while I was busy hunting for Geese, Aisha had all the work setting up the mercenary band office under control. She chose a branch manager, recruited members, and came up with a plan for business going forward. Usually everything needed my approval, but Aisha handled all of it. The Latrias helped take care of Zenith, so it took a lot of pressure off of her, but even when taking that into account, her efficiency was off the charts.

She even thought of me in the middle of this. A month after Geese went missing, Eris arrived on dispatch to the Holy Country of Millis. She came via teleportation circle. She came to protect me.

When she arrived, she was in full battle mode. Rather than normal civilian clothes, she wore the overcoat of a Sword King and carried two swords—a bold announcement to anyone in viewing distance that here was a warrior they ought to know about.

“Now that *I'm* here, it'll all be fine! I'll cut them all in half!” Eris boasted. “Dumb move on Geese's part, turning against you! Wormy guy was right when

he was all ‘Aw, no, I’m no match for the boss, no way!’”

Hearing her chatter away, cheerful as anything, settled my nerves a bit. I wasn’t going to get caught up in a battle and murdered this week, I consoled myself. On some level, I probably even believed it.

“Eris...” I said, then wrapped her in my arms. That turned into fondling her breasts, at which point she beat me to death. As my consciousness faded, everything became clear:

This.

This had been Geese’s plan all along.

— *FIN* —

...Anyway, joking aside.

Now that things had settled down a bit, it was time to get organized.

First up, take Geese at face value. Assuming he really was assembling his forces to attack me head-on, there were three things I needed to do.

One: Find Geese.

Two: Make the Magic Armor (and myself) stronger.

Three: Hammer out a counterstrategy.

When I saw it laid out like that, this is what I’d been doing all along. The only difference was that now, instead of eighty years, I had a significantly compressed timeline. Just a couple years to get good. And Geese was no average dude. Who knew what a fair-and-square, head-on attack would look like coming from him? Would he come at me with numbers or with skill?

According to Orsted, there weren’t many out there who could beat me when I had my Magic Armor on. Even so, I’d learned firsthand the other day how

numbers could tip a battle. If he could get fifteen or so world-class warriors who could coordinate like the Temple Knights had in a fight? I'd be toast.

He would need time to find people like that, though. There weren't a lot around. A year, maybe two? I felt pretty confident it would take that long at an absolute minimum. Caught in a trap carefully constructed over the course of years, *and* with numbers on his side? Even I couldn't squeeze my way out of it. The Temple Knights had a shot at winning for a sec there, and a disciple of the Man-God would be so much worse.

I just had to stop him before it got to that. I'd travel around the world and make allies of his targets before he could get to them. If he'd already turned some of them, then I'd take them out before they could gang up on me. In every job going forward, no matter how minor, I had to look for enemies. I could narrow down Geese's probable location to either the Demon Continent as a whole, and potentially to the King Dragon Realm if I really had to guess. Yeah, the Demon Continent seemed particularly likely. Ruffians like Atofe would probably jump at the chance to fight when they heard Geese was trying to take me down.

I'd planned to leave the Demon Continent till last, but it looked like we were moving it up the list. I could probably prioritize stopping by the King Dragon Realm, though. That was where Death God Randolph was, and he beat me in the souped-up Version Two. He would make a solid ally. I wanted to get to him first.

With that, my course was set.

The mercenary band was still in its teething stages, but the Latrias and the church were here to back it up. So long as the two Millis Church big shots were bringing us work, the office should be able to stay afloat for the time being. I'd achieved the bare minimum of what I came to Millis to do. It was time to head back to the main office in Sharia. Then Orsted and I could hammer out the rest of our plan.

But first, time to say goodbye.

I called in at the Latria estate, where I introduced Eris and announced that I

was returning home.

“I see,” Claire said. Even faced with Eris, who wasn’t exactly a lady, she didn’t betray any disapproval. It looked like she’d taken my words to heart. The only emotion I could detect was, faintly, disappointment.

“I assume you will be taking Zenith with you?” she asked.

“That’s right. I take my responsibility to care for her seriously.”

“Very well.”

While Aisha and I were running ourselves ragged, Zenith had instead stayed with the Latrias for the past month. Claire said she’d been pretty active. Perhaps it was the nostalgia of being back in the house she’d grown up in. Apparently, she wandered around the estate and often went out to look at the gardens. She always wanted to be outside. She was as vacant as ever, but it was clear she was making the most of being back in her old hometown.

Every man and woman in the Latria estate watched her with sadness.

In the end, I didn’t get to meet Edgar or Anise... All because of Geese. I asked Claire to pass along the message that I would absolutely set aside time to visit when I was next in Millishion.

“It pains me I didn’t get to lay eyes on Norn again...”

“We’ll be back,” I reassured her. “Next time, I’ll bring Norn. And my kids too. Aisha... Well, I can’t guarantee anything with her.”

Aisha and Claire’s relationship hadn’t gotten any better. Claire might have promised not to interfere with my family anymore, but Aisha’s existing dislike for Claire couldn’t be undone in a day. Claire, to the best of my knowledge, had basically only done what she thought was best for Aisha. A bastard should know her place and let the legitimate children have the spotlight. A daughter of the Greyrat family should act like a lady. A maid for the Greyrat family should devote herself to the master of the house.

Claire was trying to tell her to conduct herself in accordance with her station.

But Aisha was all those things and also none of them. She had no set role, and Claire apparently had a lot of opinions about that. Even now, after making that

promise to me, her gaze was harsh every time it fell upon Aisha.

“I won’t go on at length about it, as promised, but I worry about her future,” Claire said.

“What? Oh, no, I think she’ll be just fine.”

Aisha was incredible and clever—she was almost *too* clever. She’d be all right.

“I wonder...” Claire said, sounding unconvinced. “I cannot shake the feeling that she’ll make some mistake she can’t come back from.”

“There’s not too many things you can’t come back from. Besides, no matter what happens, I’ll be there for her. Me, Sylphie, and Roxy. Eris can be pretty helpful too, for certain kinds of problems.”

Claire fell silent for a moment, then said, “If that is your opinion, I will say no more on the subject.”

She looked like she had more she *wanted* to say, though. But hey, if she was worried about Aisha, that was fine. She was free to worry about whoever she liked.

“Just wait, we’ll be back again soon enough,” I said. “I’m sure Aisha will grow up a bit in the meantime. Though I can’t promise it’ll be in a direction you approve of.”

Sure, there’d been some bumps along the way, but Claire wasn’t a bad person. Not the nicest, perhaps, but she wasn’t evil. I had no issue with bringing my wives and kids along for a visit. Next time, I’d make sure we’d keep it light and short. Show her we were all well, have a meal together, chat about recent developments, then see each other off with a smile.

“I’m afraid that, given my age, this may be our last farewell.”

Our last farewell. Claire was over sixty years old. I wasn’t sure what the average lifespan in this world was, but she was still in good health. But it was a four-year return journey from Millis to Sharia. It wasn’t a short trip. We weren’t going to turn around and come back the moment we arrived; it would be a minimum of ten years before we were reunited. Claire would be past seventy. At that age, well. It wouldn’t be a huge shock.

I understood where she was coming from.

Of course in my family we got around using teleportation circles, so in reality travel didn't take long at all. I could tell her about that, but at the same time... I didn't like making it widely known that I was teleporting everywhere. It was safer to keep it close to the chest in case someone used that against me. Also, you know, teleportation was a worldwide taboo. It was still used in some capacity by the Asura Kingdom, and the King Dragon Realm, and probably by the Royal Family in Millis, too—but those were the three greatest nations in the world and even *they* kept quiet about it.

“Rudeus,” Claire said, “thank you for bringing Zenith back to me.” She bowed her head to me. Apparently, she and Zenith had taken a carriage to see a *play* of all things the other day. Claire frowned through the whole thing, but one of the servants said it was a long, long time since the mistress of the house looked so happy.

“I'll be back,” I said. “Soon.” The words were out before I had time to stop them.

“But...”

“I will *definitely* be back,” I said, putting as much strength behind the words as I could.

Claire smiled.

The last thing she said to me, still beaming, was: “Zenith raised a good boy.”



I went to say goodbye to the Blessed Child, too. I had two parting gifts for her. In the past month, Aisha had found a Millishion artisan to make something for her. So, my first gift was an armband almost identical to my own. The usual design had a jewel-inlaid bezel, into which was embedded a stone. For this one, I made the stone myself with earth magic. It was black and glossy, and engraved with the emblem of the Dragon God. It ought to convey to anyone who saw it that the wearer was one of his followers. The second gift: a scroll Orsted sent me to summon a Guardian Beast.

I showed up with my gifts and had the Blessed Child sent for, only for the simp squad to come out to meet me. Therese was with them too. She'd dodged the transfer. Apparently a petition with my name on it had helped with that. Still, she got a demotion instead, so she wasn't commanding the Blessed Child's guard anymore. A new captain had been appointed, so now Therese served under her as a sort of deputy.

As it happened, the new captain turned out to be a bit inflexible. The armband was one thing, but the idea of using unknown summoning magic inside the church was rejected as totally outrageous. But I made her do things my way.

"This is a gift from the Dragon God Orsted to the Blessed Child, to thank her for her protection of his humble servant Rudeus!" I declared. "You, a mere *guard captain*, have no right to interfere!"

I was bad luck for these people's careers...

The beast that emerged from the scroll turned out to be a silver owl. It was about a meter tall—smaller than Leo, but fairly imposing, and its golden eyes had something awe-inspiring about them. It wasn't one of Perugius's spirits, but those were super rare. I doubt things like those show up much. Plus this one was for the Blessed Child's exclusive use, so it was probably from a different pack? At least the holo-edged beastie we drew had a divine vibe to it. I might have struggled to get the captain to sign off on a gigantic shiny black spider.

"I'll be sure to take good care of it," said the Blessed Child, her eyes shining as she gazed at the owl. She reached out to stroke it, and it closed its eyes in evident pleasure. The Blessed Child seemed enchanted that it had taken to her

right after being summoned.

“That’s the owl’s job, actually,” I replied. It wasn’t a pet. She needed to relax and let it protect her, nothing more.

“Well. Until next time, then.”

“Indeed. Stay well, Sir Rudeus!” the Blessed Child replied.

On my way out, I bowed to Therese and the other Keepers of Anastasia as well. I’d probably run into them again.

Last up was Cliff.

He seemed to be off to an incredibly good start here. After the other day, both the papalists and the cardinalists had taken notice of him. All sorts of stories were circulating about him, none of them quite accurate.

“Cliff Grimor talked down the Dragon God’s right-hand man and saved the Blessed Child.”

“Amidst the pope and the cardinal’s feud, he spoke for justice and made them all see reason in the end.”

“He’s an example for all of us who follow Millis. A truly admirable young man.”

The funny part was that, as far as I could tell, the origins of the rumors were the commander of the Temple Knights and the vice-captain of the Cathedral Knights. Thanks to that, lesser knights and priests all trusted their reports and were convinced that the pope had snagged himself an exceptional right-hand man.

Also, perhaps thanks to those stories, Cliff was getting real work. Right now, that meant officiating weddings for important nobles. No matter what was going on in the world, a priest was never out of a job. Without getting into the details, Cliff had gotten plenty of real-life experience in Sharia. He was new, but he had plenty of skills and his superiors viewed him as an exceptionally talented employee. Some people weren’t so pleased to have him around, apparently... But hey, what’re you gonna do? It’s only natural that, when a talented new hire showed up who also happened to be the pope’s grandson, a few people got

jealous. Cliff would have to navigate that himself.

I wasn't worried, though. Not about Cliff. Not the Cliff I knew. He'd come out on top of whatever the world threw at him.

Just one niggling little thing.

"I'm off home then. Good to see you, Cliff," I said.

"You too..." he replied. "Give my best to Lise."

"You got it. I'll tell her not to cheat on you."

Cliff, so far as I knew, still hadn't told anyone that he was married. All he'd said publicly was that his heart belonged to another... That wasn't like him. I did get why announcing his marriage to Elinalise might be a bit tricky, though. Even around these parts, all the adventurers knew the stories about Elinalise d'Slut. There were now grizzled old veterans wandering around who'd spent their first time in her bed.

Yeah, maybe it was for the best if Cliff didn't say *who* he'd married quite yet. It wouldn't hurt to wait until he was important enough that he could deal with a few people talking behind his back. He'd get there one day. I was sure he wouldn't take *that* secret to his grave.

There was always the chance that proposals might start coming in the mail, though. And then there was Wendy. She was a servant and went home at night, but when a young man and a young woman spend some time together under one roof... Scratch that, that was stupid. This was Cliff. Beyond even my twisted mind. No way was Cliff sleeping around after all his holier-than-thou preaching. Not when even I wouldn't go there!

Welp. Time to stop brooding about this or I'm going to jinx it. You do your best, Cliff.

"Keep it in your pants," I cautioned him. "Saint Millis is always watching!"

"Don't worry, I wouldn't know where to find the time," he replied.

Cliff had been busy lately. He was good at his job, and people were coming to view him as the pope's right-hand man. With his social capital climbing like this, there were even a few nobles cozying up to him.

“Really? You’re hot stuff lately, I hear. You might just toss sweet little Wendy down on the bed and...”

“Wendy is basically my little sister,” Cliff objected. “If you haven’t touched yours, why would it even cross my mind?”

I would never make a move on my sisters! The cheek!

I assumed an offended expression, and Cliff looked down.

“It’s just...” he began. “I really wanted to make it this far on my own merit.”

I had to laugh as I replied, “If it wasn’t for you, you think any of this would have worked out?”

“Snrk!” I’d wanted to sound cool, but Cliff laughed through his nose at me.

Point taken, jeez. Cliff saved the day, but he also brought me here, and I’m the one who started trouble in the first place.

There was a sense of fireman-turned-arsonist about it all. Still, he’d stayed true to himself the whole way through, and now he was getting recognized for it. In the end, Cliff’s good fortune all stemmed back to Cliff.

“Anyway,” he went on, “thank you, Rudeus. I’m getting noticed now, and it’s all thanks to you.”

“No, thank *you*. You connected me to the right people in Millis, and now we’ve got the mercenary band set up here too.”

The sale of Ruijerd figurines, on the other hand... That looked like it might take a bit longer. If I rushed things along, I could get us ready for sales immediately, but I didn’t see us getting many customers. The mercenary band also wasn’t totally settled in yet, so it’d also lead to problems on that front... But hey, any other challenges we faced here were as good as solved. I’d just throw Cliff at them as another chance to prove himself.

“Everything from here on out is all me,” he said.

“You got it. Good luck,” I said.

It didn’t turn out exactly how I’d planned it, but I was pretty sure I’d fulfilled my promise to Elinalise too. Cliff would be okay. However things went with the

other priests, he'd gotten off on the right foot. And it wasn't like there was a shortage of problems for him to tackle on his own. The feud between the papalists and the cardinalists was very much unresolved. I was excited to see Cliff achieve great things in his own way. And if it all went to hell, he could always come back and work for me.

Try to take it easy, I thought.

"Sorry I couldn't do much for you this past month," he said.

"Oh, don't sweat it," I replied. I had my battles; Cliff had his. "If something happens with one of the Man-God's servants, though, send me a message on the communication stone right away. I'll be there as fast as I can."

"You got it," Cliff said, with a decisive nod. I wasn't going to be there for every battle, but in an emergency I'd come running. He was my friend.

"All right then, Cliff... Stay well."

"You too, Rudeus."

"Keep in mind, though—I might end up back here again in a year."

"Good. I should be ready by then to present Lise to everyone."

Oh, yeah, there's the business of Elinalise's curse. This can't be goodbye for long.

"...We've come a long way since you were the new kid at the university, huh?" he said.

"Nah, you'll always be the same old genius Cliff to me," I replied.

Cliff shrugged with a hopeless smile.

And with that, my battles in Millis were over. The clash with the Latrias, then the machinations of the Millis Church, and finally Geese's betrayal... A lot had happened, but all these new experiences propelled me toward what I had to do.

Get ready, Geese. I'm coming.

Extra Chapter:

The Berserker Sword King and the Blessed Child

WHILE RUDEUS SAID his goodbyes to Cliff, there was another reunion underway.

It took place at the church headquarters, in a serene garden, where spring flowers bloomed in a riot of color. A lot of the trees were leaning slantwise after Rudeus's Quagmire a few weeks earlier, but their vigor was in no way diminished. The Sarakh Trees had finished flowering, and the Balta Trees took their place and were now bursting with blossoms.

Two women stood before the trees, facing one another. One had blonde hair, the other red. They were both busty and fairly tall for women. Swords hung at their waists, and one wore a suit of blue armor.

Therese and Eris.

Also present, standing behind Therese like she was trying to hide in her shadow, was the Blessed Child. She fidgeted, rubbing her knees together and trying to look smaller.

Oh, yeah, and there were also a bunch of guys in blue armor standing around the three women, I guess. Think of them as scenery.

"Come now, Blessed Child," Therese said gently to the Blessed Child behind her. "Look! It's Lady Eris! Rudeus made time especially for her to see you." But the Blessed Child just curled further in on herself and kept fidgeting.

"C-come on, now... It's *Eris*," Therese tried again.

Eris was her hero. Stretching back into her earliest memories, the Blessed Child had been shut up in her white room. When something bad happened, she was brought out, sat before some grown-up who also didn't want to be there, and made to sift through their unsavory thoughts.

That was her entire world. No room for freedom. No hope.

Then one day, as she was escorted from some place to another, she and her

guards were ambushed. Surrounded by assassins, she was sure her life was about to end. But she didn't feel especially frightened or concerned for her own life. She quietly welcomed her fate.

And then, Eris arrived.

Her movements were all so direct, yet none of the attackers could keep up with her. All they saw was an afterimage of red hair burned into their minds.

She was brilliant. From the first fraction of a moment she laid her eyes on Eris, the Blessed Child saw a divine, righteous beast.

"I'm glad the child's unharmed," she had said. It wasn't until they returned to the church that the Blessed Child realized that the glorious warrior meant *her*. She realized that she'd been saved. Then, she remembered that she'd seen the woman's eyes, and therefore knew her name. *Eris*. Her name was Eris. Eris Boreas Greyrat.

The Blessed Child said it out loud, replaying the memory in her mind. From that moment on, she idolized the Eris in her memory.

She started to imitate Eris. She reacted to things with wild exclamations, and she roared her decisions. She shoveled down mountains of food.

All this endeared her to her guards, the Keepers of Anastasia, which only encouraged the Blessed Child to love Eris even more. A long time had passed since she first started to model herself after Eris. Her own personality and the ideal woman in her mind were perfectly enmeshed with one another. She wore it like a second skin.

Around this time, she met Rudeus. Through him, she became reacquainted with Eris secondhand.

The Blessed Child assumed she would never see Eris again. She wanted to, but she never asked for permission. She knew all too well that she didn't have that kind of authority. But when she heard that Eris was here, in Millishion, she couldn't help herself. She went to the cardinal and to the pope, and begged them to let her see Sword King Eris. The Berserker Sword King was dangerous, she acknowledged, but she wanted to see her nevertheless—even if only briefly. Just long enough to say thank you.

No one objected and so her humble request was approved. A meeting between the Blessed Child and the deadly Berserker Sword King was arranged, with a guarantee from Rudeus that, “If anything happens to her, I’ll take the blame.”

With Eris in front of her, however, the Blessed Child had no idea what to say. She felt like looking into Eris’s memories would be rude, so she deliberately didn’t meet her eyes.

Eris stood there, her arms folded. She’d already introduced herself as Rudeus’s wife and a Sword King. After that, Therese introduced herself, then offered her thanks for Eris’s past assistance. That was about five minutes ago.

“Hey, we don’t have much time, you know,” Therese said.

Eris stood still on her best behavior. It didn’t come naturally to her, but Rudeus had given her strict instructions, so she kept her impatience in check.

“She really helped me out, so try to be polite,” he’d said. “She might come across as a bit stuck-up, but under *no circumstances* are you to punch her, okay?”

Eris would do as he said. Still, she was starting to get irritated. She was not into waiting around.

“Can we hurry this up?” she said.

That was all she said, but it was enough to make the Blessed Child squeak, “Of course!” and jump out from behind Therese. Fear that she was making Eris angry won out over embarrassment.

“Um, er, I’m the Blessed Child! Thank you very much for the time you saved my life!”

“What...? Don’t recall that!” Eris declared.

“You don’t?”

Eris said it so loudly and directly that the Blessed Child, on instinct, looked into her eyes. “...Oh,” she said. When she looked, she saw no trace of herself at all. Her face fell.

Well, what did you expect? she told herself. *You knew, you knew there was no*

way she remembered. Even so, all this time she'd held on to hope that just maybe Eris might remember her. That she might say something like, *Oh, right, the kid from back then! You've grown up!* The Blessed Child was smitten with her, after all.

But Eris had seen her face and been told what had happened, and she didn't remember her at all.

Maybe if I looked for longer, I might find a memory stowed away in a corner somewhere...

But when Eris thought of long ago, the only memories the Blessed Child found were of Therese dangling Rudeus on her knees.

She was the Blessed Child of Memory. She knew that memories were fallible and easily forgotten. That did nothing to lessen her disappointment.

"But Rudeus said you saved him, right?" Eris went on animatedly. "Thanks for that!"

She stood tall with her arms folded. Her bold voice tore through the Blessed Child's haze of disappointment. The Blessed Child shook her head to clear her mind.

"Not at all..." she said. "I would have done anything to help your husband, Lady Eris."

It didn't matter if Eris didn't remember her. She still loved her and was still grateful to her.

"By the way," Eris pressed on, "what's your name, anyway? Rudeus said he's going to be working with you in the future, so I want to make sure I remember!"

"My what...?"

Name? I don't have a name, she thought. Up until now, it had never felt like an impediment. But now here was Eris, saying she wanted to remember it, and the Blessed Child had no answer. She was lacking something important. That missing thing struck her, suddenly, as a profound loss.

"Erm...I don't..."

“A Blessed Child is just like, you know, like what Zanoba is, isn’t it? It’s not your *name*, right?” Eris forged on.

When she said “Zanoba,” the Blessed Child looked into her eyes again. There was another Blessed Child from another land who apparently possessed a name. Eris didn’t care much about him, though, so she didn’t remember anything apart from the name. It was a shock.

The set dressing started piping up.

“How dare you!”

“The Blessed Child is the Blessed Child!”

“You mock her?!”

“She needs no name!”

“Pray that your god protects you!”

This helped her calm down a bit. Not having a name had never been a hindrance to her before, she told herself. Besides, she couldn’t do anything to change it now.

“I’m very sorry, but I don’t have a name,” she said.

“Huh... Well, that works too,” Eris said, unfazed.

The Blessed Child didn’t look into her eyes, so she didn’t know what Eris was thinking. If she had looked, she might have seen how Eris came to throw away the name “Boreas.” She would have known that names meant nothing to Eris.

Eris exhaled through her nose, then said, “Names, pah! Who needs ’em anyway?”

The Blessed Child was relieved. In all her life, this was the most she’d ever agonized over whether to look into someone’s eyes.

“It was rather surprising to hear you were here, though,” she remarked. “I didn’t think you were in the country.”

“Yeah, Rudeus’s jimmies are still rustled, so I came running...uh, *real* fast!”

Eris knew that the teleportation circles had to be kept secret. But the Blessed Child, who was well aware of their existence, giggled.

“Ah, did you really?” she said. “You are quite incredible, Lady Eris.”

“Heh, damn right!” Eris replied. She looked pleased now, and the atmosphere of the whole garden relaxed. Sensing this, the Blessed Child decided she would flatter Eris more, which could only make the exchange more pleasant. Normally, it wouldn’t even occur to her to push the conversation one way or another.

“The...the thing is, you’ve always been my idol, Lady Eris!”

“Wait, what?”

“Yes,” the Blessed Child went on, “so please tell me how I can be like you!” Eris looked down at the Blessed Child. She saw her round face, her plump arms, and her fluffy, out-of-shape body.

“You want to be like me?” she asked.

“I do! I always wanted to be as cool as you, like the way you talk...uh?”

She noticed that Eris had drawn her sword—too late. Only two of her guards were quick enough to react. They were two of the best swordsmen in the Temple Knights, and both already knew that they were doomed.

Eris’s sword was already moving. There was no sword, or even Eris anymore, merely a flash of light in the air, but they sensed something had been cut and severed. Something...!

Who could have done this? Well, who else?

“How dare you!”

“You didn’t—!”

The Blessed Child’s arm dropped...

...to her side, precisely as a branch that was about half the thickness of her wrist came crashing to the ground. The Temple Knights stared at it in silence for a moment, then went back to being scenery like nothing had happened.

Eris picked up the branch, then briskly set about snapping off all the off-shooting twigs. The Blessed Child stared at her, thinking about how Eris’s sword had appeared in an instant, what a wonderful sword it was, and how none of the Temple Knights’ swords remotely compared.

When Eris was done tidying up the twigs, she was left with a staff about a meter long.

“There you go,” she said, holding it out to the Blessed Child.

“Um...?” The Blessed Child stared at her, wide-eyed with confusion.

Eris turned side face, gripped her sword in both hands, raised it above her head—then swung down. A holy *whoosh* so loud, it might banish evil, shattered the silence of the garden. The Blessed Child’s ears rang.

“Your turn,” said Eris.

“U...uh? Um, yes, ma’am.”

She lifted the staff above her head like Eris had done. Then, with a little “Hi—*yah!*” she took a swing. But her “weapon” was an unruly, unbalanced meter-long stick, heavy and still green and supple off the tree, so the force of the swing pulled The Blessed Child along with it. She stumbled forward. The scenery cried out, “Ohh!” but didn’t mobilize.

“Er, how do I—”

“Lower your body more,” Eris said, “then relax your elbows and try to swing with your back. Try again.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

She kept swinging the staff without a clue what was going on. Every time she swung, Eris gave her advice.

“...You’ve gotta use your voice when you swing: one, two, one, two!”

“One, two, one, two!”

The Temple Knights didn’t get involved. They didn’t understand it either, but they could see that Eris wasn’t a threat to the Blessed Child, and so they saw no need to put a stop to things. Plus, it was cute seeing her swinging that stick around. The captain eventually tried stepping in, but the other knights held her back. The entire skirmish between props played out without anyone on the main stage noticing.

“Haa...haa...Lady Eris...” gasped the Blessed Child after around thirty swings,

her voice trembling. “My...my arms...”



“Yeah? Okay, that’s enough then. You can stop,” Eris said. The Blessed Child dropped the staff as instructed. The fatigue spread from her shoulders down to her wrists, almost like her whole upper torso was falling asleep. She felt a twinging sensation, like little cracks were spreading down her arms. She raised them up to her ears and swore she heard her muscles creak.

“U-um...” she said, looking up at Eris, worried. Why had she been swinging that staff? She felt like she’d been tested. Was she a failure? Was Eris disgusted with her? *Ha! You thought you could be like me?*

The thought made her feel miserable.

“You’re to do that every day, starting tomorrow,” Eris said. “Also, start running. Around this garden will do.”

“Huh?”

“If you don’t know what to do, ask one of these guys,” said Eris.

She was looking right at the Blessed Child. Feeling as though Eris’s eyes were drawing her in, the Blessed Child looked into her memories.

She saw the hard life Eris had led training in the Sword Sanctum. She saw her swinging her sword without food or drink, running through the snow, screaming, fighting, honing her skills. It was a simple memory. A mere sequence of events, showing how Eris had gone from who she was long ago to who she was now. There had been hardships and suffering, but that honed Eris into the person she was today.

“You *can* be like me,” Eris said. Her voice was clear and certain. Had Rudeus been there, he might have cut in with a snide remark, like *Yeah, I don’t think that’s happening...* But he wasn’t. There was no one around to tell her it was impossible.

“Um...” came a voice from behind her.

The Blessed Child turned and found herself looking into Therese’s eyes. She saw Therese’s own memories of her training.

Therese practiced with her sword in secret, then trained together with the men, all while her mother sniped at her. At times she was happy, and at times

she was sad. One thing was constant: she never put down her sword.

The Blessed Child then looked around at the other Temple Knights. She glanced through them all, one at a time. What she saw in the depths of their eyes was not as intense as what she had seen for Eris, but she saw plenty of effort. Memories not only of sword training, but of magic and schoolwork, were vividly etched into their minds. Not one of them doubted that Eris's training plan would get results.

She could be like Eris. It was possible.

It would be hard, she knew that. It had been hard for all of them, too. But she could do it.

"Can I really... Is this going to work?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine." It was Therese who answered. "You won't be allowed to use magic, or a real sword, but there shouldn't be any issue with just physical training... You'll all help teach her too, right?" she asked, looking around at the scenery. Then she returned her gaze to the Blessed Child.

Staring into her eyes, Therese said earnestly, "If something happens, though, if you're attacked by assassins or something, you must promise me that you'll sit back and leave it to us to take care of them."

Within her memories, the Blessed Child saw an inexperienced noble taking on an enemy and dying. Therese was being kind. She was telling the Blessed Child not to let herself share that fate.

"In the name of Saint Millis, I swear it," the Blessed Child said, nodding happily. Everything felt indescribably joyful. As though summoned by the happy atmosphere, the silver owl, which had been tootling aimlessly around the garden during their discussion, returned to her side. It tilted its head, looking up at the Blessed Child and hooting.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked, crouching down and holding her hand out to it. The silver owl leaned forward, like it wanted her to scratch its head. She rubbed its feathered crown with her fingertips, and its downy feathers fluffed up as it closed its eyes in pleasure. Eris watched them, desperate to join in. She loved beastfolk, but not just beastfolk—any kind of fluffy animal was

good in her books. She met plenty of dogs and cats, but never birds. She could bring down a bird in flight if necessary, but she rarely had the chance to approach a bird this big if she wasn't fighting it.

"Hey, um... Can I pet your owl too?" she asked.

"It'd be my pleasure!" replied the Blessed Child.

Having received permission, Eris squatted down confidently. Her pawing was so forceful that the silver owl recoiled from her touch. Eris went perfectly still. Sudden movements, she'd learned, were a no-go. Animals instinctively feared anything that was stronger and faster than they were. Forcing submission made them obedient, but if you wanted them to like you, you had to convince them that you weren't a threat.

Linia had told her that while submitting to Eris in bed one time. In fact, ever since she'd started acting on that advice, all the pets at Rudeus's house stopped being so terrified of her. Now they simply closed their eyes and accepted their fate.

Eris reached out, slow as anything. The silver owl didn't move. It watched her with nervous eyes and huffed a little, but it seemed to respect its mistress's wishes and didn't pull away. Her fingertips reached its feathers. Its wing feathers looked fairly stiff from a distance, but now she felt how soft they were and her heart leapt with excitement. She wanted to grab it and bury her face in its feathers, but she sensed that was overkill. It'd definitely flap away if she tried it. The same went for Leo, and for Linia and Pursena too.

She could live with that. Eris went on stroking the silver owl. The owl froze like an impala caught in a lion's jaws, but none of the humans noticed.

"Do you like my owl?"

"Turns out birds are great too," said Eris. She luxuriated in the owl's softness for a time, then stood up, her cheeks flushed. Fur was nice enough, but *feathers*, she thought, were on a whole other level.

A question suddenly occurred to her. "What's its name, anyway?"

"Its...its name?" repeated the Blessed Child, looking confused, and thinking, *oh dear, names again.*

“When you get a pet, you give it a name. That’s plain old common sense,” Eris said.

“Is it really?”

“Yup, Rudeus said so,” said Eris.

The Blessed Child was taken aback. A name? She’d never given anything a name before—she didn’t even have one herself. She would never be allowed to use one. It did seem like having one made some things easier, however, which gave her pause.

“A name...” she murmured. Seeing her looking so deeply lost, the scenery got all worked up.

“Blessed Child...”

“Allow me...”

“No, allow me...!”

“Fools! The Blessed Child must decide for herself.”

Just then, a man appeared in the garden. An intruder on their private meeting.

“Hey, Eris, I’m all done now,” said Rudeus.

Our hero, returned from his farewell with Cliff, and feeling a touch sentimental, was...no, hold on, strike that, like I had time to wallow around feeling sentimental—I was getting ready for battle. I had to be a robot, a *sentinel*.

Anyway, there’s a little insight into how Rudeus was feeling as he entered the garden, his face set.

Seeing the rest of them, he asked, “Um, what happened?”

“She’s picking a name.”

“A name...?” He looked around the garden. The Blessed Child looked troubled, and the otaku watched her nervously. The newly appointed captain looked as though she had no idea what was going on. Therese’s smile was strained.

That told him all he needed to know.

Oof, that's a tricky one. I'm sure Eris wasn't trying to be mean, though.

Then the Blessed Child piped up, saying, "Oh! Would *you* choose a name for me, Rudeus? I'd be so grateful." She couldn't choose one herself, but she was sure it would be a piece of cake for Rudeus.

"Wait, me? Are you sure?"

"Incredibly so," she replied.

Rudeus frowned, looking between Eris and the Blessed Child. He had to make a good choice, but he'd shown up mere seconds ago and his brain was stalling. His thoughts ran around and around in circles like a hamster wheel, then ground to a halt. That hamster was pooped.

Then, a name popped into his mind. A remnant of his past life that reminded him of the Blessed Child, her soft voice, and the joy she spread.

"Okay," he said. "How about 'Nurse'?"

"Nurse? Why, that's a wonderful name!" she said, then squatted down to pet Nurse's head. "Starting today, your name is Nurse!"

Watching her, Rudeus let out a little gasp of surprise.

"Is something the matter?"

"Er, no, it's nothing," he said, averting his eyes. Exactly like someone hiding something would do. She wondered what might be on his mind, but otherwise she felt perfectly satisfied. She had gotten to see her beloved Eris, and her owl had a name. She also had her training, starting tomorrow. It had, she thought, been a very good day.

"Thank you so much for coming today, Lady Eris," she said.

"I'll be back! And when I'm back I'll take another look at your form."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Eris was satisfied too. She got to stroke the owl. That was more than enough for her.

The same went for the scenery. Eris gave them a bit of a scare when she pulled out her sword, but if the Blessed Child was happy, they were happy.

Starting tomorrow, all of them thought, I'll be there to give her footholds and handholds and whatever else she needs for her training.

Rudeus alone stood sweating, thinking, *Ah, crap*, as he kept his face down.

Therese was the only one who noticed. *Just who did you think you were naming, hmmm?* she thought. She didn't say anything, though. She just smirked.

Nurse watched them all, its head cocked to one side.

And so, Eris got herself another apprentice. Starting the next day, the Blessed Child started to lose weight, which made the Temple Knights treat her even *more* like a pop idol... But that's a story for another time.

Extra Chapter:

Therese Looks for a Husband

THAT DAY, Therese paid a visit to the Latria estate. She visited her parents a lot more frequently after the whole incident with Rudeus.

When she was young, Therese had rebelled against their mother much like Zenith had. She thought she would never set foot in that house ever again. But time passed, and she started her job. As she grew up, she also grew to accept that her mother would never change.

Back then, almost all her meetings with Claire had ended in a shouting match, but the incident with Rudeus changed things. Claire's nagging decreased, and so Therese had started finding more reasons to stop by. Chief among these was that at her parents' house, meals came out without needing to cook or clean up after. Therese visited once every few days now.

Therese was a knight, but she had status as a noble's daughter. She should have had the means to employ a servant or two. After being kicked out and effectively disowned by her family, however, she had no choice but to depend on a knight's meager stipend. Once she joined the Blessed Child's guard and became a captain, her stipend increased to a level where she could have comfortably supported a family on it. The problem was that in Millis, it was customary for the woman to provide betrothal gifts when she got married. Given her estrangement from the family, Therese could well have given up on marriage entirely, but she did not. Instead, she scrimped and saved, dreaming of meeting her handsome prince someday.

Reconciling with her family had rendered all her hard-earned savings meaningless, but she held on to them anyway.

"Now then, Therese, when are you going to get married?" Claire asked.

Immediately, if it were an option, was what she thought. But all that came out was, "I..."

For twenty years now, she had dreamed of her handsome prince. Now she

was probably too old to ever meet him. It was foolish to even hope for a partner.

“You’re not so young any more. I won’t say any more to you about a woman wasting her time in a job, but don’t you think it’s about time you settled down?”

“Is that really your opinion, Mother?”

“Who else’s opinion would I be expressing? You are your own person, I understand that, but I worry about you as your mother.”

“No, it’s just, Mother... How am I to get married unless you find me a partner?” Therese asked.

As a general rule, marriages amongst the Millis aristocracy were arranged by the parents of the betrothed. It was a parent’s *duty* to find their child a partner. There was no prohibition on children choosing their own partners, but such cases were few and far between. A few factors had prevented Therese from getting married. One was that she was hardly an ideal bride, another was that she had no family to introduce her to potential matches, and there was also the fact that no one wanted to risk inviting the Latrias’ enmity by marrying their disowned daughter.

Now that Therese and Claire had reconciled, that last one had been resolved. So that was something.

“Whatever do you mean? Didn’t you yourself say you didn’t want that?”

“*Did* I say that?”

“I have a rather vivid memory of you yelling, ‘Did dying in a power struggle make my sister happy?’”

“Right. I did say that, didn’t I,” Therese mumbled. She’d forgotten.

“You are your own person, and I thought you would find someone yourself. Why do you think I never brought it up until now?”

“Makes sense...”

They had both apologized for back then. Well, at least Therese had *intended* to apologize. Claire accepted Therese’s life choices, which was her version of an

apology.

They sat in silence. Therese never would have dreamed that her words back then might contribute to her present, miserable predicament.

“I would like to take back what I said back then,” she said.

“Then I shall begin searching for a husband befitting a daughter of the Latrias.”

“Th-thank you, Mother...”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake. You’ve always been like this. Making decisions without consulting anyone else, then assuming everyone understands when you change your mind. As a Millis lady, Therese...”

Claire’s lecture went on in this vein for a while. Therese lowered her head dutifully, but inside, she was fist-pumping. This wasn’t exactly how she had planned to grab a groom, but it was going to work out.

After being told, “You’re already rather old for a bride, so you’d best be prepared to settle,” at the outset, Therese was actually rather impressed by the proposal that came a few days later.

His name was Dusklight Morchite, the Morchite family’s fifth son. He was twenty-seven years old and a Temple Knight, albeit one with no important duties—he served as more of a reserve. He usually had nothing to do because of this, and spent his days wandering around the city as he pleased. That description alone didn’t make him sound like the pick of the bachelor pile. However, Therese was one of the Blessed Child’s guards and so earned enough to support them. She also had the authority to delegate duties to lower ranking knights, meaning that she could recommend him for jobs if need be. He was the perfect age. Therese’s personal preference was for guys just before they came of age, but so long as he was younger than her, she’d make do. She’d been dreading some greasy old lout well over forty, so in comparison, she felt like she’d struck gold.

Claire was the one who ultimately said, “You are a daughter of the House of Latria. You can do better.”

For all of Dusklight's good qualities, Therese didn't intend to commit right away. Not until she'd met him in person. If he was good-looking, she thought, then she'd sink her claws in.

"This is my fourth daughter, Therese Latria," Claire said.

They had gathered for the marriage interview at the Morchite family estate. These interviews were always carried out at one of the homes of the two families involved. There was no rule as to which, but the custom was that the prospective groom's family hosted the first interview, and the prospective bride's the second. It was an opportunity for the six participants—the parents and the potential couple—to get an impression of each family's estate. From the third interview onward, other family members were sometimes introduced. If a family had hidden debts or financial troubles, then the servants might be surly, or the cleaning might be unsatisfactory, or there might be evidence of visits from unsavory individuals—all manner of problems might be brought to light.

As the Latrias and the Morchites were both well-known Millishion aristocracy, the interview process was merely a formality.

"While my daughter is a little old, and lacking in certain qualities expected in a lady, she is also, as you know, a Temple Knight. Should this marriage take place, she would therefore be understanding of her husband's work and able to support him. She herself is eager to be married and will be a dedicated wife."

This was how Claire introduced her. Therese wasn't sure whether to feel praised or insulted, but she let it go. She never usually wore dresses, but today she was dressed in a blue gown. She lifted the hem of her skirts and gave a graceful curtsy. She'd practiced it especially for today. Or rather, she'd been forced to practice.

"I'm Therese. It's my pleasure to make your acquaintance," she said, with the smile and the simper she'd practiced as much as the curtsy. Her clumsy execution made her wish she'd applied herself properly back in school.

"A-ack!"

She froze in the middle of her introduction when she saw her potential husband's face. There, scowling at the sight of her, was a man she knew. He

knew who she was as well. He was clean-shaven, and his hair was immaculate. She'd caught glimpses of that well-groomed face behind a helmet. Always very proper. Cleanliness was next to godliness.

Well, this was awkward. Therese was sure she didn't know any men called Dusklight. Perhaps he *wasn't* Dusklight. Perhaps Dusklight was the middle-aged woman standing next to him?

"This is my fifth son, Dusklight Morchite," said the middle-aged woman. "Although at present he has been pressed into a dead-end, idle job, he is a devout believer and quite capable. As such, I hope you will recognize his future potential—"

So the man *was* Dusklight, then.

"Y-yes..." mumbled Therese. When she'd known this man, he hadn't gone by that name. But there was no mistaking him. She'd seen him every day for years.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Dusklight Morchite, at your service," he said, using that name again.

Therese knew he usually introduced himself differently. Yes, he had another name. Dust Bin, of the Keepers of Anastasia.

She knew beyond a doubt that it was him.

At the same time, this wasn't such a strange coincidence. Aside from the leader, all the Keepers of Anastasia were required to keep their backgrounds secret. There were a variety of reasons for doing so, but it was primarily a measure to protect the unfathomably precious Blessed Child.

Once, years ago, the Blessed Child had almost been killed. Back then, the Keepers of Anastasia hadn't existed. A unit of the Temple Knights had handled the Blessed Child's security. One day, an assassin had made an attempt on her life. By a freak stroke of luck, she had lived, but the incident revealed a traitor in the ranks of the unit assigned to her protection. A foreign spy had taken his family hostage, forcing him to feed them information about the Blessed Child.

That incident led to the establishment of the Keepers of Anastasia. They were all knights selected for their loyalty to Millis and the Blessed Child, their talent, and their anonymity. By having them wear helmets that concealed their faces

and obscured their identities, the church could prevent information concerning the security around Blessed Child being leaked to the outside world. They were a deterrent to anyone with designs against the Blessed Child.

The reason Deputy Captain Therese didn't know the *names* of her subordinates was, of course, because she alone knew their *faces*. Someone had to know what they looked like. That fell on her because it was the deputy captain's job to weed out imposters. But even knowing their appearances made Therese extremely dangerous as a potential traitor.

What Deputy Captain Therese ought to do in this situation was pretend that she hadn't noticed anything. That she knew Dust's secret was an inconvenience for both him, and for Therese. She would break off the proposal like nothing had happened, and they would go back to work like nothing had happened. That would be best for both of them.

That was one option. But there was another one. Dust's cover was blown. She could have him removed from the Keepers of Anastasia.

But she knew that Burial Shroud had a black horse called Black Sanctus. She knew that Funeral Procession always went to the town theater on his days off. She knew that while most of them were single on account of their work, Skull Ash had a wife. There were lots of things she knew about them all. If she were to use that information, she could probably work out all their real identities. Total anonymity was the pinnacle of wishful thinking. So, she rejected the idea of having Dust kicked out. Perhaps that was her full reasoning. But perhaps Therese's next thought—*you know, he's not bad-looking*—had something to do with it. She maintained a ladylike smile as their parents continued the interview.

Marriage interviews amongst the Millis aristocracy began with the parents recommending their children. This included what kind of person they were, what was special about them, and why they were a suitable marriage partner. They were carried out in this fashion because, so the custom went, the first and mandatory thing that was needed to make this work was the parents' approval. The children listened to the speeches, and they would give them an idea of their prospective partner. A parent would say things their child might shy away from, so it was an important step.

Unfortunately, Therese was spacing out.

“And finally, he is young,” said the middle-aged woman, and the parental recommendations were over. Now, the two of them were left alone to talk. No matter what world you were in, no one wanted their parents hanging around on a date. Now came their opportunity to learn one another’s likes and dislikes, laugh over trivialities, say everything they couldn’t bring up in front of their parents... It was the time for seduction.

Amongst the ladies of Millis, it was also generally understood that this alone time was crucial for sealing the deal. This was where you had to show yourself at your best if you wanted to win the heart of your dream guy. It was equally important if you needed to push away a man you had no interest in.

“Whew...” Therese sighed, standing up as soon as the parents were out of the room.

Dust stayed where he was. Therese went over to the window, then stood with her feet shoulder-width apart, her hands clasped behind her back. Then, her head girlishly cocked to one side, she turned around. Had she been a teenager, it might have seemed charming, beautiful, elegant—all things that could help win a guy over. For a woman of Therese’s age, it was more likely to just make them embarrassed for her.

Her eyes weren’t laughing, though. This wasn’t a game. She was serious. Dust felt a chill run down his spine. She was on the hunt.

“You’re very charming, Duskligh,” she said in her best simpering voice.

Therese figured that she might as well marry him as anyone. He wasn’t such a bad catch. On the contrary, he was a *good* one. He was passionate about his job and he would never divulge a secret. This whole thing had been an unfortunate coincidence, but now that he was here, she knew he’d rise to the occasion.

“Um...? C-Captain...Captain Therese?”

“Oh, please don’t be so formal! We’re to be married, after all,” Therese said, her hand floating up to touch her cheek.

Then, she began to walk slowly toward Dust. Dust couldn’t conceal the shudder that ran through him, but he was otherwise frozen like a prey animal.

Dust Bin, the most quick-witted of all the Keepers of Anastasia, couldn't move. Eventually, Therese, having closed the distance between herself and her quarry, sat beside him.

"Dusklight, I think we should fare very well together if we got married. I hear your work isn't going so well. My rank is still captain after my demotion—though I might not look it, all dressed up like this. I get a good salary... You needn't worry about providing for the family. Therese Morchite... Doesn't that have a nice ring to it?"

She edged toward him, and he recoiled. He kept shuffling away only to eventually find himself at the end of the sofa. He had to do something.

"Wait!" he said desperately.

"Oh, I'm not waiting," said Therese. She laid her hand on his.

She was stronger than he'd expected. She meant to make sure he didn't escape. Dust was stronger, though. He shook her hand off, then stood up and retreated to a corner of the room. Dust Bin, the top of the *A-Team*, ace of the Keepers of Anastasia, ran away.

"Captain! What are you doing?! Is this supposed to be funny?!" he exclaimed.

"I... Funny?" Therese echoed.

She was shocked to have been rejected so bluntly. Her attempt at seduction had been completely botched. It had taken her so much courage. She'd never done anything like that before. She'd shown him a side of herself she'd been saving up for her future husband...

She let out another deep sigh. Pretending they were strangers right up to their wedding day wasn't going to work. Of course. That should have been obvious. Why had she ever thought marrying a secret knight was going to work out?

It was desperation, obviously. However, she was also an experienced knight. She'd been in tight spots plenty of times before.

She stood up again, then walked slowly back to the window. She planted her feet shoulder width apart and clasped her hands behind her back. Wondering

why she was attempting that same weird pose again, Dust watched, confused.

“All right, well, I’m still going to call you Dusklight,” she said.

“Captain...Therese?”

“You’ve messed up, Dusklight. I can’t believe you blew your cover like this.”

“Er...yes, Captain,” said Dust. The authority in Therese’s tone crushed his voice.

Therese turned slowly around to face him. Unlike last time, now she moved purposefully, like a knight. There was a tiny Dust reflected in her eyes, but he saw that his terrified scowl had been replaced by a shamed frown.

“Explain yourself,” Therese said. “How did this happen? Shouldn’t you have bothered to check the name of your potential bride?”

“I’m sorry, Captain. I made a mistake. I never thought it would... I thought you... Lady Therese, I thought you were long married, so I didn’t, I didn’t think to check...” He trailed off.

Are you trying to piss me off? Therese wanted to snap back, but she restrained herself.

“Under these circumstances, I have no choice but to use my authority as deputy captain of the Keepers of Anastasia to dismiss you,” she continued. “Failing to do so would expose the Blessed Child to undue risk.”

Dust didn’t reply.

“As you are well aware, I am not strong. I have always done my best, but I don’t have a talent for the blade or magic like the rest of you. I’m average as they come. If someone wished to harm the Blessed Child, they could easily take me prisoner.” This all rolled easily off her tongue. Her mind was racing, though, without any particular destination.

“If I were somehow gone, the overall power of the Keepers of Anastasia wouldn’t be diminished. I believe that I am well suited to the role of commander, but you are each strong enough to fight individually without me leading you. *However*. Now, I know who you are. Under torture, I would give you up. I would tell them that you are Dusklight Morchite, fifth son of the

House of Morchite. Anyone who sought to harm the Blessed Child would doubtless come after your family and demand that you give up the others to protect your parents and siblings. You wouldn't know. So instead, they tell you to take the others out one by one. They may even tell you to kill the Blessed Child yourself. I cannot allow that to happen. And so, I thought, what if the two of us were family? Then, you could protect me. Then, we can avoid putting the Blessed Child in danger. Yes. It's a good plan. A *masterful* plan, don't you think so?" Therese said, coming to the end of her long, rambling argument.

While she spoke, however, Dust's demeanor had changed. Before he'd been leaning away from her, looking a little uncomfortable, but now he stood up straight and his mouth was set in a hard line. His eyes gazed steadily at Therese, like she might eat him.

"Captain," he said, "that's impossible."

"Impossible? What...do you...?" Therese stammered, feeling like she'd been clubbed over the head. But then, she had to admit that she wasn't young. Dust was hardly the most marriageable age himself, but she was still a fair bit older than him. Still, she was a Latria. That meant she was good-looking, and her duties as a knight kept her active, so she'd maintained her figure. She came from a perfectly good family.

So it had to be her personality.

"Would you mind, um, explaining why...is it impossible?" she inquired.

Could she change her personality? That was the big question. If it were possible, she'd fling herself at the knees of Dust, her subordinate, crying, "Please, I can change!" and beg him to marry her.

"If the Blessed Child were in danger," Dust replied, "I would kill my whole family to protect her."

"...What?" Therese gaped, stopped in her tracks.

"That would remove the possibility of hostages," he went on. "After that, I would kill everyone who threatened the Blessed Child, even if it meant sacrificing myself. Thus, what you say is impossible. It is impossible that the Blessed Child would ever be put in harm's way."

His eyes were totally deranged. Therese listened. The wheels in her mind turned more slowly until, at last, the gears reengaged.

Dust Bin, she realized, was a fanatic. He was madly dedicated to the Millis doctrine, and that was why he'd pledged his life to defending the Blessed Child. She was the reincarnation of Saint Millis himself, the symbol of his faith. He worshipped her and would do anything to protect her. His was an unwavering belief. He never doubted.

All of the Keepers of Anastasia were like that.

As she thought this, Therese's desire to marry him vanished like a bubble bursting. Her heart came around to the realization that she'd misjudged him. Why had she wanted to marry a guy like him? She *knew* he was like this. She'd lost her mind. She'd gotten desperate and forgotten who this was, and then she'd mistaken what she wanted to see for reality. She was thoroughly convinced so long as he was good-looking, that was enough.

Therese was left with only one option.

"Well said. That is the quality that makes you worthy amongst all the faithful to protect the Blessed Child." It was a desperate bid to save her pride.

"Thank you, Captain! You honor me!" Dust said.

"From this day forth, you are to be ever-vigilant and ensure you never again make such a blunder."

"You have my word, Captain!"

With that, Therese's pride was safe. As deputy captain, she had tested the faith of her subordinate who had *brazenly* presented himself before someone who could—under no circumstances—be allowed to know his true identity. She determined that he could be allowed to continue as a member of the Keepers of Anastasia. No deputy captain would ever try to seduce her subordinate because she was desperate to get married. That was ridiculous.

"But Captain," said Dust, smiling at last, "Captain, that performance was brilliant. I was horrified!"

"Were...were you really?"

“The way your eyes glittered... I never thought you’d really come on to me like that, Captain!”

I’m horrifying, Therese thought, feeling the blood rush to her head. She shouldn’t have to put up with this. Not from this dipshit lackey.

She’d really given it her best shot. Sure, she still wished she’d applied herself to learning proper manners back at school, but even so.

“I was captivating.”

“...Huh?”

“I was so beautiful, so gorgeous, you weren’t sure if you could restrain yourself. Right?” The force in her tone brooked no contradiction.

Cold sweat ran down Dust’s forehead. His back was sticky, and a tremor rattled his legs. Fear. Dust Bin of the Keepers of Anastasia, whose unshakable faith allowed him, unflinching, to face down even the strongest opponents...was scared.

“I could just marry you, you know. In fact, maybe I should. You’re a careless guy. How can I know something like this won’t happen again? If you marry me, you at least don’t have to worry about any more marriage proposals.”

“But I... Um...”

“I’m kidding. I’m rejecting you,” Therese said, then stood up. “We were both off-duty today, but we’ll be at the Blessed Child’s side again tomorrow. Don’t be late.”

“...Yes, Captain,” Dust replied. Therese’s skirts fluttered as she turned and strode from the room, looking every inch a knight. Dust watched her go, then wiped away the sheen of cold sweat accumulating on his forehead.

“That was the correct decision,” said Claire as soon as they returned to the house. “You appear to be unhappy about it, but a man of that caliber cannot be a suitable match for a daughter of the Latrias. That was a practice round. I shall find you a better partner next time, so make sure to use what you have learned this time so that you may conduct yourself as a lady...”

As Claire got into the swing of a very long lecture, Therese felt a twinge of unease. Her first prospective match had been Dust. On paper, he was an adequate candidate, but in reality had turned out to be catastrophically mismatched. She worried that if Claire went on searching like this, she might turn up other similarly unsuitable matches...

But she nodded, and said, "I understand, Mother."

For one thing, it would be hard to turn around and announce she'd thought better of it after *she* was the one who'd gone to Claire for help... And the truth was, she really did want to get married. There was no way Claire would bring her *more* awful matches.

"I'll do my best," she added.

"That's the spirit, Therese. I know you're busy with your work, but be sure not to skimp on your studies and your practice. You want them to see you as a lady."

"Yes, Mother!" Therese said cheerfully.

Next time she'd meet a good man, she was sure of it. Before long, Therese's certainty would be rewarded. But that's a story for another time.

Extra Chapter: The Monkey and the Wolf

Geese

MY EYES OPENED.

I rose, cracking my neck and checking all my parts were working. No tingling in my limbs, no indigestion. No weird growths on my skin. Apart from a mild grumble in the belly, I was fit as a fiddle.

I went out of my tent and stretched, feeling my back crack as I yawned. I watched the sun rise. The direction of the sun told me the direction I was facing. I compared that with my map and the ridgeline to confirm my current location. I'd checked yesterday too, before the sun set, but things can look different from morning to evening, y'know? It's important to check two or three times. It's mostly the idiots who don't confirm where they are who get lost.

"West today, huh," I muttered to myself as I worked out where I needed to go. No one was around to reply.

Last night the Man-God came into my dreams again. Told me to go west with the rising sun, rest at the roots of the third tree on Fenyl Boulevard, then get on the fifth carriage that passed. I'd ride in the carriage for a while, then get off at the town it arrived in and stay at the New Leaf Inn. That'd keep me out of the hands of Ruquag's Mercenary Band, he said.

Doesn't make much sense, does it? Now, if you're an average guy, you'd probably start to feel a bit suspicious of all that. It's not like the Man-God ever tells you *why* you gotta do everything just so. So at some point in the course of your life, you wind up doing something a little different to what He told you, and bam, they got you. I get it, I really do. Back in the day, I used to pull stuff like that myself.

These days though, I live by the Man-God's words. That's the right way to live,

I reckon. Far as I'm concerned, the Man-God's word is law.

Yeah, all right, I hear you. Obviously just because I do what He says doesn't mean everything always turns out perfect. Sometimes His advice gets me into some pretty gnarly situations. Ain't even uncommon. But you know what I say to that?

So what? I mean come on, think about it. Whether I do what He says or not, sometimes shit happens. Life's not all sunshine and roses. One thing I can say for sure though: so long as I obey Him, I don't die. How do I know that? I'm weak as they come, but I've gotten through some majorly dangerous situations and lived to tell the tale. Look, I've watched a lot of tough guys way beyond my level slip up and die. It's pathetic, actually. These guys are always swaggering around like they're king badass, then when they're about to die they start blubbering. *Help me, I don't wanna die, save me, Mommy!*

I get it, everyone's a little pathetic, it's fine. But the guys who go down like that are always the dudes who go around bragging about how death don't scare them. Bonafide hero types, every single one of them. Don't it make ya sick?

Look, people try to avoid death—that's nature. Our instincts tell us dying's bad, that it's freakin' scary. And don't get me wrong, I'm scared. *I don't wanna die.* And that's why so long as the Man-God gives me advice that keeps me alive, that's all I need. He's the reason I've survived this long. You could say He's my guardian angel. Or whatever the evil version of that is.

The story of how I got my chance to pay Him back for all this starts a few years ago. I was passed-out drunk in a tavern in Asura like usual when the Man-God spoke to me. Said He had a request. Now, his 'requests' pretty much never end well. The last time He had one for me, my hometown got wiped off the map. I wept enough for a lifetime and screamed until my voice gave out. This time, no doubt in my mind, it'd be just as bad. He likes to make you think he's on your side and then break you. Back when my hometown got destroyed He showed up *just* to laugh at my stupid shocked face.

I expected all that, but this time something was different. I didn't get this far in life without knowing how to read people. I could tell the Man-God was in a serious bind, and He'd come looking for help. That's why I decided to accept. I

did think it might be an act, but the dude's not exactly an actor... Plus, if He really was in a jam, I had no hesitation about lending a hand. A debt's a debt, after all, and I owed Him big.

The Man-God said that Rudeus had betrayed Him. In reality He'd probably shown up to have a good laugh at Rudeus like He'd done with me, and it hadn't gone how He'd wanted. Anyway, He said Rudeus was His enemy now. That he'd sided with the Dragon God Orsted, I think it was. Number two out of the Seven Great Powers. A real big shot. The details aren't important—all I needed to know is that Boss had allied himself with this big-shot god, and now he was making trouble for the Man-God.

The Man-God can see the future. He can see so far ahead that the Demon Eye of Foresight might as well be blind. You'd think that'd make beating his enemies child's play...but apparently it wasn't that simple. He didn't tell me all the ins and outs, but He did tell me two things.

First, He could only see the futures of three people at a time. Second, He couldn't see Orsted's future. If Orsted went and interfered with any of the three people whose future He'd already seen, those futures would change. From the Man-God's point of view, if Orsted—and only Orsted—messed with their futures, it'd be like absolutely nothing had changed. From His white room He could see the whole wide world, but Orsted was a gaping hole in His vision.

Now, he said, Rudeus had inherited this little quirk of Orsted's. He was under the Dragon God's protection or something. Orsted had some kind of curse on him that made people fear him and see him as an enemy, so there weren't too many people like that. No one went calling on him for aid, and he didn't have any allies. But with Boss as his go-between, all of a sudden he could get loads of people on his side. Now, how do you think that'll work out for the Man-God?

The funny thing is, the Man-God *can* see His own death. One day, without warning, His vision flipped. He used to see Himself towering over where Orsted where he lay fallen, kicking him as he lay there. Now it was Orsted doing the laughing and the kicking.

Why could He only see that moment? Well, probably because at that moment, Orsted and the Man-God were both in the same place. He saw that

vision through his own eyes, and that meant He could see Orsted too. Look, I don't worry about the details of how the Man-God's powers work. What mattered was that Rudeus was now a threat. The Man-God needed Rudeus taken out quick, and He'd already tried a bunch of plans to kill him. No matter what He tried, though, nothing worked. In the Asura Kingdom, He'd tried pitting the North Emperor and the Water God against him, but neither of them got the job done. Not only did Orsted come out fine, but He couldn't even take down Rudeus. Rudeus went on his merry way, still recruiting.

So the Man-God hatched a plan. If three disciples weren't enough to take down Orsted, He'd just make more. We'd copy Rudeus. Orsted couldn't build alliances himself, but with Boss as his go-between he rustled up a whole network of helpers. The Man-God could only work through three disciples at a time, but so long as He got one of those disciples to gather allies, He'd end up with a lot more than three followers.

Sweet idea, huh?

And I'd been singled out as the man for the job of wrangling those allies. I did wonder why He went with me... But then, the Man-God's usual playbook when He finished using someone was to trample on everything they love and throw whatever was left in the trash, so maybe I was the last guy He had left.

Once I was done building our army, He'd wait for the perfect moment, then have them all strike at once. Bye-bye, Rudeus.

And that's how I ended up here, running my tail off finding people to turn to the Man-God's cause. My deadline was the Man-God's "right moment." Not much time left, but I wasn't doing bad. Not that finding allies was easy.

Here's how we tag-teamed it: the Man-God told me, "That guy!" and then I went and met them, buttered them up with my best smooth-talking, and then told them to be at the "meeting point" for the "right moment."

Everyone the Man-God had sent me after so far was sketchy as hell. They could get the job done for sure, but they were all a little cockeyed, or they only seemed to half follow what I was talking about, or they had some weird *issues*, or I just couldn't get a read on them at all... I mean hey, that's probably why they'd sit still while a guy like me was talking.

Main problem was that there weren't a lot of them. Including me, I could count us all on two hands.

What they lacked in numbers, they made up for in muscle. From world-famous warriors to dudes who'd fit right into Millis fairytales, they were all top of the class. I tried to suggest that maybe we should just hire a couple of hundred generic types who'd work for gold or whatever instead, but that got the thumbs down. The Man-God was nervous about traitors. He wasn't wild about this business of taking on people whose futures He couldn't see.

Fair 'nuff.

The Man-God isn't exactly popular. You didn't have to be a genius to know what would happen if Rudeus showed up to win hearts and minds. Boss might not look it, but he's got a knack for getting people to follow him. Worried about something? He'll be there worrying with you. Got a problem? He'll be there to solve it with you. No matter how much you lag behind, he'll wait for you to catch up, and even though he's got crazy power levels he's nice to guys who don't.

That's why we couldn't rely just on numbers. The Man-God was right.

Also, sorry to say, I'm not the charismatic type. I can't work a crowd.

Every ally was a potential enemy, so we couldn't take on too many. We'd also be more likely to end up with idiots who didn't listen to the plan. That was all you needed to turn a winning position into a losing one. So we stuck with a select few. If nothing else, these guys wouldn't turn traitor. They turned out to be pretty useful, for all their quirks.

With their help, we'd suss out Rudeus and Orsted's weak points.

Hmmm...

Maybe I'm speaking outta line, but I reckon He could probably be a bit more trusting. Y'know? It wouldn't even matter who they were, if we had numbers on our side, it'd really increase our options. You don't get the big money unless you take a few risks.

At the end of the day though, he's the boss, I'm the disciple, his word goes. The chief did have a few words for me this time, though. *Why didn't you kill*

Rudeus when you had the chance? You could've poisoned him!

Yeah, sure. The thing is, I gotta be true to myself. How to put it? Well, betraying Boss would, if you look at it from the right angle, be the same as betraying Paul, right? I could never have betrayed Paul, so how could I murder his son, right? Man's gotta have a code, y'know?

The Man-God didn't buy it, but I know myself. Say I'd tried to poison Rudeus or whatever, I reckon I'd have choked before I went through with it. Along the way, I'd have gotten cold feet. But after *he* turned traitor, there's no more fear of that. I've made my mind up for real now. Rudeus Greyrat is my enemy.

So here I am, present-day, getting ready to set off for yet another day of sniffing out hidden talent to join the case.

How many was I up to now? Three? Four? Every one of them so far was worth an army by themselves. I never thought I'd get to meet this caliber of guy, let alone talk to them. Far as I was concerned, they were all the stuff of legends and way outta my league. When I started talking to them, though, they were surprisingly...I mean, okay, it shouldn't have come as a surprise. But they were all just...guys. Ordinary guys. Even if they had some personality issues.

Especially the first one. He was famous enough—even you might know him. But damn, he really was just another guy.

So here we were, a little while after the Man-God came to me with His request. Before I set off, the Man-God had some busywork for me.

I grabbed a blade of a demon sword lying rotting in the back of a storehouse of old junk in the Asura Kingdom and then a hilt from a burial mound in the King Dragon Realm, then took them to a blacksmith who handled demon weapons and had them reforged. I went and got a hold of this alcohol made by a pretty shifty tribe on the Demon Continent. Few other odds and ends. I didn't know what any of it was for, mind you. Though I mean, from what the Man-God told me, and imagining what was coming best I could, I could see how that stuff might be handy. Better safe than sorry, as they say. Better to be over-prepared. I also did a little snooping, but I can't beat the Man-God when it comes to gathering intel so a lot of that work went to waste.

After all that, I headed north on the Man-God's instructions.

Unlike Rudeus, I didn't have any ancient Dragon Tribe displacement relics, so I was limited by travel time. But there were a few other teleportation circles around, funnily enough. I didn't know if Orsted knew about them or not. He didn't seem to be using them, so I used them to get around. There are only a few of 'em and they couldn't get you absolutely everywhere, but they came in handy.

On the Man-God's say-so, I went to the town closest to my final destination, stocked up on cold weather gear, then plodded out into the snow that was just beginning to pile up.

I was heading for a ravine in the middle of a forest, and the forest was home to monsters. I'd definitely run into some. A guy like me had no business going in alone without any weapons or defense.

But I had a few tricks up my sleeve. The Man-God told me that if I entered the forest at the right time, then did the right thing at the right moment, I could get from A to B without being bothered. For example, He said, "When you reach a cave beneath a great Tournel Tree, stop and count slowly to twenty before moving on." I did as He told me, checking underneath each Tournel Tree I passed. There was no chance I'd miss it. If the Man-God said there was a cave, it'd be there.

There'd be no sign it worked and no explanation why I oughta do it. I'd stand there in front of a little hole maybe just big enough for a kid to hide inside in the softly falling snow and count slowly to twenty. I wouldn't look inside, or pull anything out of it, nothing would come crawling out. If everything went perfect, best-case scenario, *nothing* would happen. Without a hope in hell of understanding what I was doing, I'd hurry off on my way.

Oh, but if I hung out just a second longer, something *real bad* would happen.

Now I'm no slouch so I could guess what's what. I'm an S-ranked adventurer. I knew what kind of monster made its nest in this hole. This was where Snowbucks, these beasts kinda like giant deer, lived when they were infants. They spent the winter there, then came out in spring. They holed up to protect themselves against their natural predators...basically every other flesh-eater

and monsters. The head honcho in this forest? Well, that'd be the Iceclaw Tiger. They burrow through the snow after their prey, then pounce when you're least expecting it. I never noticed a thing, but hell, I probably *was* being stalked by an Iceclaw Tiger. This here, though, was an easier, tastier meal. May the little baby Snowbuck rest in peace.

Anyway, that's how it works when you can see the future. Things might be dangerous, but there's no need to worry about dying. Nothing unexpected happens. You might get a few scrapes, some bruises, but you always get the job done.

I got through the forest that way.

Just outside the forest, I found the ravine. A cold wind cut through it; the cliff walls were all sheeted in ice. Chunks of it floated in the river that ran along the bottom.

"Brrr..." I shivered.

Cold didn't do it justice. I wanted to get the hell out of here *right* quick. But I swallowed that feeling and set off. I walked for half a day alongside the icy ravine until I found a path leading down the cliff face. I followed it down, then continued further up the ravine until I found him.

He sat leaning against a huge boulder, cradling his sword. A campfire blazed in front of him, where a hunk of meat on a spit sizzled as it roasted. I didn't need to ask to know what kind of meat it was. I could see the carcass lying just behind the man and his fire.

It was covered in white scales the color of snow and had enormous talons and fangs: a Snow Dragon. An S-ranked monster. These monsters were sudden mutations of the A-ranked White Drake. They were twice the size of a White Drake, breathed ice, and could use high-level water magic. Their wings weren't for flying, but for helping them jump. They used their muscular legs to kick off the walls of the ravine and leap down on their prey.

They weren't technically dragons, but they were still closer to a dragon than a White Drake. They were as strong as dragons, hence that name—Snow Dragon, ya see? They were seriously rare, and tyrannized and devoured whole flocks of White Drakes. Not the kind of monster you went hunting alone.

This guy seemed to have taken this bad boy down all by himself. I wasn't surprised or anything. I knew he was the sort of guy who could do it. And now we were gonna have a talk.

When I got near enough to him, a shiver shot up my spine. This guy would kill me. He didn't have to warn me. I knew that past this point I'd be stepping in range of his sword, and I'd best be ready to face the consequences. My face felt like it was going to cramp up, but I forced myself to show a smile. A smile that would hide my fear and radiate confidence. Then, smile fixed in place, I went up to him. It felt kind of wrong for me to be looking down on this guy, but he was sitting down. What was I supposed to do?

"Yes?" he said.

It was a challenge, but his voice was deathly calm. He wasn't trying to threaten or intimidate me, just asking indifferently after my sudden appearance like you might ask someone's name.

So I answered, "I'm Geese."

"I didn't ask your name," he replied.

All right, read that wrong. I wondered where to start. I had a lot to talk to him about. To start off with, though, I decided to just shut up and stand there. Guys like this hate smooth talkers. They had their own method of persuasion.

For y'all following along, that method's "*violence*." You know. That thing that I'm no good at. And this guy in particular—his violence was impeccable. Great stuff, world-class. No need to break that out here, though. I sure wasn't about to start any. Silence would work fine.

"What the hell's going on here?" he growled.

See what I mean? I kept my lips zipped and he started talking all by himself. He wasn't done. "The other night some bastard calling himself *god man* or whatever showed up in my dreams saying he wants me to help him out. Said if I heard him out, he'd make my dreams come true. He tells me about this place as proof. When I showed up, I found this thing." He jerked his thumb at the Snow Dragon carcass behind him.

Hey now, Lord Man-God, You didn't say nothin' about calling him here. If I'd

been told to show up here then found a beast like that waiting, I'd think I'd been tricked.

"When I was a lad, I ran up against a Snow Dragon and barely got out with my life," he said. "I was going to go back and kill it one day, but along the way I forgot about it. Would you believe it? I show up and here it is."

Ahah, so that's Your game, I thought. I got it now. The Man-God was a pro at this kind of thing. Making your dreams come true, or close to it. Anyway, this guy didn't seem to feel like he'd been tricked. Even after having a Snow Dragon set on him.

Oh, right, of course. One of those hero types.

"So I killed it, and now you show up," he went on, then pointed at me. "A monkey face... Hey, you said you're called Geese, right?"

Finally, he looked up at me and for the first time, I saw his face. He didn't look especially strong. I spend all my time trying to read people, so I can usually tell from their faces whether they're strong or weak. It's not like I judge it off how rough they look. It's all in the expression. People who're strong usually put it all out there. They work hard every day, so they don't think of it like hardship. It's normal business to them. They have a clear image of their own capabilities and they don't waver. That means they don't usually put up a front.

This dude wasn't showing off, but he was wavering. Someone had come along and torn everything he thought was true into tiny pieces. Now he was exhausted, out of patience, and at his limit. That was what his face told me. Ohhh, I got it. I see. He'd gotten his ass kicked, and recently. Beaten! Half dead. This is someone who thought that wasn't possible, or at least thought he had a few years left before he declined to that point.

He'd had his world rocked thoroughly, so that now he didn't know what to think. Sapped of confidence, he'd come here to lick his wounds. *Oh, yeah, I know just what your deal is. I've seen it a hundred times before. None of them quite so much a cut above the rest as you, but all strong enough in their own right. The look of a big, unbeatable guy despairing after someone cut them down a notch or two isn't a sight I'll soon forget. The thing is, just 'cause you're feeling down doesn't mean all's lost, buddy.*

This guy was still a master of his craft. I had no doubt I could use him.

“Explain,” he demanded, so at last, I opened my mouth. There was so much I had to say to him. After the Man-God gave me his profile, I’d worked out a bit of a speech. Hence why I stayed mum till now. Guys like him, they really fly off the handle like they’re having a fit when you start jabbering on trying to smooth talk ‘em. The art of talking’s all in making sure you’re clear and to the point.

“First off... Right, yeah, so I’m here as a delegate for the Man-God.”

“Dele-what?”

Say what? You ain’t heard ‘delegate’ before? Man, I can’t abide unlearned types... Yeesh, all right, ya got me. I didn’t go to school, either.

“Look, the Man-God will grant your dreams. In return, he’s got a teensy favor to ask. He’s gathering allies. I’m here as I guess what you’d call the errand boy, getting the band together.”

“Hah, dreams, eh...?” he said. “You and your boss know what my dream is, then?” He stroked the hilt of his sword.

Ooh ho ho, that’s scary. He didn’t do anything but stroke it, but if the fancy struck him that sword would be out before I could blink and then my head could kiss bye-bye to my body. Or maybe it’d be my left and right eyes making their farewells. This dude’s body language was telling me loud and clear: if I didn’t talk seriously, I was dead. If I gave an answer he didn’t like, also dead.

Fortunately, I knew what his dream was. The Man-God told me everything ahead of time. I knew why this sad-sack loser was lurking by himself out here. If that info was wrong, though... I mean, it’d be just like him to tell me wrong.

Oh, Holy Man-God, do not forsake me. Even I, Your humble servant, won’t find it funny if I die here.

“The Dragon God Orsted,” I said. It felt like the temperature around us plummeted, but that told me that I was bang on the money. If he had no reaction that I could pick up on, I’d be as good as dead. We were officially in business. I’d told him something I shouldn’t know. While his mind reeled from the shock, I kept talking so he didn’t have a chance to start thinking again.

“You wanna defeat the Dragon God Orsted. He beat you once, long ago, so you trained to become the strongest there is, and after a fashion you got there. But then, you found yourself chained up by the restrictions you set on yourself, no longer even trying to go after your goal. Your ultimate enemy. The Man-God’s going after Orsted too.

“Only, well, He’s not going for glory; he just wants him dead. By any means necessary, eh? And you’re the means, see? Only...sorry, mate, but you don’t have a chance all on your lonesome. I’ll be inviting a few more to the party.

“Whoa there, don’t glare at me like that! Was anything I said just now wrong? You know full well you’re no match against Orsted alone.

“But I reckon you want to try, eh? All this time, you’ve wanted it. Otherwise you’d never have run off from your house where you lived all those years, left behind everything you depended on all that time, ditched your family to come live like a vagabond out here. You coulda had a cushy job in government. You coulda gone wherever you pleased. Am I wrong? Eh?

“So what I’m offering you is the right to challenge Orsted. You could roam around out here till the day you die and you might never run into him. Or he might flat out reject your challenge and send you packing. Stick with me, though, and I’ll get you the best possible stage for your showdown. I’ll make it so that Orsted’ll face you—no running or hiding.

“Easy now, I get it. I get what you’re thinking. You reckon you’re not entitled to take on Orsted. But didn’t you swear an oath to yourself, back when he beat you last time? You said you weren’t gonna ever lose again. Not to Orsted, not to nobody. And you managed it—right up till the other day, you were undefeated.

“And yeah, you lost. You got your second taste of defeat. Even after you swore that oath. You got walked all over like how you usually knock out small timers. And that’s why you came slinking off like a dog to trudge around this ravine. You’re not even looking for Orsted, you’re wandering aimlessly around. Yeah, I get it. You don’t deserve it, right? Now that you’ve been beat, just that once, you’ve lost your right to challenge Orsted.”

There was a sharp glint in his eyes now. Still though, he still didn’t come at me with his sword. He used his words instead.

“That’s wrong,” he said.

“Yeah, you’re right about that! It’s all wrong! Totally wrong!” He caught my drift. My words were getting through to him. “Not deserving? As if! You absolutely deserve it! I mean come on. Who says you’ve gotta be number two before you earn a shot at number one? Just ‘cause someone else gotcha, does that mean you can’t take on Orsted? Who says? Nobody! Now, when you think about it like that, you’ve got more of a right than anyone. You spent your whole life working toward it!”

I saw a shadow in his eyes. He was cracking. One more little push.

“You *ought* to challenge Orsted. Who cares about winning or losing? You might be weak, past your prime—who cares? Heck, maybe that’s better! It might actually be better! Now’s when you get to shake off those chains. You can go and face him without anything hanging over you.

“Now sure, maybe you’ll get crushed. So what? What are you gonna do, wander aimlessly till you get old and frail and die like a stray mutt? You’re really okay with that? You’re not a punk, are you?

“So what’s stopping you? Come on. Join me. Then we’ll take on Orsted. What d’ya say?” I finished, then I reached out a hand to him.

He didn’t say anything. His eyes were shadowy, hesitating, faltering, staring straight at me.

Oooh, I overdid it.

It’s always the best policy to dump all the information you’ve got at once, and only give the other guy the chance to think once you’ve set him on a path. The thing with these kind of standoffs is that if you talk too much, they shut down altogether. He was reacting to some of what I was saying, so I thought I was doing all right. But maybe he wasn’t the cerebral type. It’d be unexpected, but this was the kinda risk I had to take. Anyway, you can’t force people to think the way you want by cramming a buncha words into their skulls. So, overwhelm them a little up front, set the tone, let them stew on it. I gave him all the math, he just had to put it together. But something inside of him was stopping him. He needed an excuse to swallow the bait, then I’d have him. That’s my approach.

Actually, if he were smarter, I think he'd already be aboard. Too bad.

He didn't speak. Real quiet. This ravine was the Snow Dragon's lair. No other monsters to bother us here. No wind. I couldn't even hear the sound of water from the frozen stream. Only the sizzling of roasting meat told me that time was passing.

The man was more than just silent. He didn't move a muscle. He was so still he could've been dead. He had no presence at all, like he wasn't even here.

Silence gets to me. When everything's silent, that means I'm alone. I'm nothing on my own. All it would take was one monster lurking about here. I'd be dead meat. I wasn't gonna roll over with my paws up, but I wasn't about to kid myself I could win.

All I could do was...

"I'm not interested in becoming any man's pawn," said the man suddenly. "Even if that means I rot away out here."

He didn't take my hand. Worse, he reached for his sword. I felt sweat prickle all over my body. Every cell was screaming at me to get the hell outta there. But my brain fought back and told me to stay put. It knew I couldn't get away. This guy could cut me into pieces in a heartbeat. My corpse would be buried in the snow until spring thawed it out and the bugs came to eat me up.

But I was still in one piece. He wasn't toying with me. If he wanted to kill me, it'd be over in a second. So why...?

Just then, the man muttered, "Hey, monkey face. Why're you doing this?"

It felt like he was just giving me a chance to answer before he killed me. "You didn't think maybe after you came to me, spout some bullshit, I might just cut your head off and leave your sorry corpse here?"

Oh, the thought occurred to me. More than a few times. Every single time I walked up to some raging madman, fighting back the urge to scream, using my tongue and every ounce of my wits to talk 'em down.

Let me ask you though, you ever think about the pains I've gone to so I didn't piss off guys like you?

“What dream’s your master granting you, eh? What’re you doing this for?” the man asked.

“What for...?” I hadn’t expected that question. But it made sense, now I thought about it. I must be confusing for others looking in.

“I’ll have you know, I’m a faithful servant of the Man-G—”

“Don’t you give that ‘faith’ crap,” he said.

A wave of malice washed over me. My legs started shaking like mad. Something within me was twitching. It was so intense it made everything up till now feel like nothing. I started wondering if maybe I wasn’t already dead.

“I’ve run into my share of devout followers. Maniacs like those Millis Knight Orders that’d do anything for their precious god. I don’t get that sense from you, not one bit.”

Whoa there, don’t stereotype me like that. The Millis Knight Orders are a bunch of bona-fide fanatics.

But then, maybe challenging Orsted means I am too. Yeah, puttin’ it like that, it makes sense. Number two of the Seven Great Powers, and the opponent this guy gave up his whole life to try and beat, and—

Well, the only one I’m gonna be fighting is Boss. But seeing as it’s me, that doesn’t change much. Why would someone like me risk my skin to fight an opponent I can’t beat, one that’s totally out of my league? That’s all he’s asking.

No one would do that without a good reason.

But, huh. Why, though? Why was I doing this for the Man-God?

Now it was my turn to fall silent. When you’re talking to guys with a temper, clamming up’s tantamount to a death wish. The funny thing was though, he gave me a little time. I guess when you get to the best of the best of all the angry guys, they’ve developed a little patience.

Everything sank into silence again. My thoughts stretched back. Far back. Way back to the time from my own birth to when I became an adventurer. Before I met the Man-God.

I was born in a little village in the south of the Demon Continent. I was the

third of five kids of the village chief. It wasn't much, but we lived a little freer than your average villager. Back then though, I felt plenty restricted. See, my future wife was chosen for me when I was born, as well as my future job. The job of a son of the village chief was to live the life he was told to. So long as I pulled that off, I could do whatever else I wanted.

The job they picked was record-keeping. I kept track of the food we grew and caught, the goods we got through trading those with the outside world, the goods we bought. I counted everything in the whole village and wrote it down tidily. That was it.

It was important work, thinking about it. Over the years as I saw shops that keep slipshod books and adventurers who couldn't manage their gold, I got how important it was. All young Geese thought back then, though, was that it was *boring*.

There's so much more I could do, I thought. If I just got a chance to pick up a sword or study magic I'd show everyone: I could be somebody. Or maybe if I could just go into the service of some country you'd all hear about my big heroics. I'd go down in history.

Whenever I started shooting my mouth off like that, my father beat me down.

"Know your place!" was what he liked to say.

Looking back, I reckon my father said it because he saw me for who I really was. My father knew the limits of my potential. I didn't, obviously. How the hell was I supposed to know my place? I'd never stepped outside it.

So I flew the coop. Abandoned my job, ran away from home, and stowed away in one of the merchant caravans that came to trade with our village. I left my family and my betrothed to run away to the biggest town nearby.

That was where my legend would begin. I was absolutely convinced of that. But reality caught up with me real fast. Whether it was magic or sword craft, I was a lost cause. I couldn't even hit average. I guess I managed about as well as anyone else, battle chops aside, but I sure didn't stand out in any way. I could *barely* beat the average when I worked my butt off. Mastery, though? Don't make me laugh.

I tried all kinds of stuff to try and find my talent, but it was no good. I was firmly stuck being average. Mediocre, no matter how you looked at me. Yet I tried to make it as an adventurer even so. That was my dream, see. I'd thrown away everything for it. I couldn't give up and slink back to my village after all that.

I wasn't too bad with my hands, so I thought to try out crafting. Managed to complete some F-ranked jobs. As a lone adventurer trying not to freeze to death, I somehow managed to keep myself afloat. It didn't satisfy me, though. F-ranked adventurer jobs were, when it came down to it, just odd jobs. I was the town handyman, jack-of-all-trades. How was that any different to life back home? I hadn't run away to do this crap. I wanted thrilling adventures! I wanted to do great deeds that'd fill those who heard my name with awe. *That* was my dream.

So I went for it. I clumsily picked up a sword, got myself a second-hand set of armor, scrounged up some teammates, then went out into the wilderness to do gathering and slaying jobs. It was a disaster. We got slaughtered. Just like most beginner adventurer parties on the Demon Continent, the monsters tore us to pieces. The only reason I survived was because of a dream I had right before it happened.

In an empty space, standing on a white floor that stretched on forever, a man with a face I couldn't make out gave me a divine message.

If this happens, He told me, *here's what you should do*. It was all so casual, I shook it off as a random dream. No way what He was describing could happen to us.

But, of course, it did. My teammates' heads were ripped from their bodies and devoured and I was left alone, cornered, snot and tears running down my face. That was when I did what the mysterious man in my dream had told me to do. A dead man will take whatever help he can get.

I survived.

From that day forth, little Geese became a disciple of the Man-God.

And I thought life as a disciple was basically heaven. The Man-God taught me how to fight with a sword and with magic, and while He might not have given

me a power on par with a Demon Eye, He readily told me the future. With that at my disposal, I moved up in the world. I breezed through some seriously nasty situations that I'd never have worked out on my own, which got me noticed by some real powerful guys. They became my allies. I used my knowledge of the future to help those guys out and gained their trust. Together with them, I set off on a thrilling adventure.

I loved every minute of it.

"See? Didn't it happen exactly like I said? Anything apart from fighting, I've gotcha covered!" I told them. So long as I could go around bragging, I was happy. I felt like I was one of the best. These real powerful guys treated me as an equal, and all the nobodies around us assumed I was a big shot like my peers. What else could I ask for?

After my hometown got wiped out and I joined Fangs of the Black Wolf, the Man-God didn't tell me the future as much, but I didn't pay it any mind. I was having fun running after Paul, anyway. He still popped up a fair bit to save my skin when it counted. The Man-God's advice was like a part of who I was. It was thanks to Him that I got to be a real adventurer.

Part of me, though, felt empty. That feeling was strongest after the Fangs of the Black Wolf split up and I spent a while wandering around by myself. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was a fraud, that I'd never achieved anything myself. If I weren't such a pushover, maybe I could've believed in myself a little, but the fact remained that I couldn't fight to save my life. Without my knowledge of the future, my only purpose was to tag along after really strong, really amazing types and cover their weak points.

My whole adventurer persona was just a shell of lies and pride.

You know how goldfish poop clings to them while they swim? That was me. All I had going for me were cheap tricks and a quick tongue. There wasn't anything, not one thing I was really good at. Was I okay living like this? When it came down to it, what did I even want? Who did I wanna be? Those feelings had always been lurking deep inside of me.

What I told the gruff guy in front of me was simple. "You probably won't understand, but in my whole life I've never been ahead," I said. I wasn't trying

to talk him into anything. Right now, I was giving voice to what lay in my heart. “I got by on scraps, always trying to get an edge on people, lying and sweet-talking and riding around on other people’s coattails. I never ever achieved a single thing independently.”

I’d never had anything I wanted. I had a dream. I wanted to go on an awesome adventure and go down in history. It wasn’t so much to ask, was it? Who actually cares about history?

That was my one desire, y’know, to be special. I got to go adventuring, but I was always tagging after my teammates. I never had them follow me somewhere I wanted to go. I reckon I knew, deep down. I knew I was borrowing all my power, and anything I achieved with it would be hollow. At any moment, a little gesture from the Man-God could take it all away.

So I tried not to want anything. If I set my sights on something, I thought, I’d never get it. Just relax, have fun, go with the flow of whatever life threw at me. Then everything would work out just fine. Now there’s a jinx to live by, I thought.

...It’s a bit different now, though. The Man-God came to me for help. An all-powerful god lowered Himself down to ask *me*. He needed me. I wasn’t trash. I was somebody who mattered. If we won this fight, in other words, that’d prove that I was special. I’d always been on my guard around everyone, layering up lies upon lies, thinking I was useless. What if this was my chance to be strong, just like I always wanted?

“That’s why, how should I put it...” Was that an answer I’d stake my life on, though? Something inside me told me I shouldn’t. That all of it was crap. That I already knew what I was worth. I knew it. I knew I was nothing special. Can’t swing a sword, can’t use magic. There was the odd thing I could do better than your guy on the street, but I never mastered anything. I’d always be a jack of all trades and a master of none. A monkey-faced nobody.

But...

“I can’t let it end like this,” I said, and then I shut up. I was surprised at how *right* those words sounded to me.

That there, that’s it. That’s how I always felt.

All this time I thought I was having a good enough time with life, enjoying myself, and one day I'd die in a ditch and that'd be that. But deep down, I felt different.

"You can't, huh...?" said the man. He took his hand off his sword. His eyes were dull now, the gleam from before gone. "Hah, if that ain't the truth. You're exactly right."

I'd blurted out what came into my head, but thinking it over, what I said fit this guy's situation pretty perfectly.

I can't let it end like this. I couldn't, and neither could he.

"All right," he said with a savage grin, then reached out and took my still-outstretched hand. "I'll come be your pawn." It was all so quick, it felt a bit anticlimactic. But what I'd said just now had brought this guy around. This guy, the greatest swordsman in the world, so powerful all humankind knew his name.



“So what do I do now? Do I guard you?” he asked.

“Uh, no...”

I felt a smile coming and forced it down. Maybe I didn’t need to, but it’s not good practice to go around smirking at people. It drives ’em off. That’s another jinx, write it down.

“For now, you’re to go here,” I said, handing him a map. “Once you get there I’ll tell you what comes next. One more thing—if we run into each other, act like you don’t know me. This is all top-secret.”

The location of the final showdown was already set. When I wasn’t off making invitations to guys like this, I was getting it ready. I was being careful, taking my time to shore everything up. I wasn’t gonna lose.

“Fair enough,” he said after he took the map. “One thing, though. I’m no actor. You don’t want to get caught, you’d best stay out of my way.” He started to walk away. It was like he didn’t give a damn about me—like I wasn’t even here.

I liked that. You could tell he’d lived his whole life by his sword. No pointless actions, no wasted words. When he decided something, he just did it. Not the easiest person to maneuver, but insanely powerful. And now...he was my pawn.

I watched his back retreat until he faded from sight. Then, with a whoop, I punched my fist up in the air.

That first guy was the easiest. He was a big enough deal to need no introduction and sure as hell didn’t act like he had time for a nobody like me, but in the end all we had to do was talk. He came around to what I was saying and joined me of his own accord. Timing probably had something to do with it. After all my plotting and worrying, in the end it was something I hadn’t even meant as persuasion that conveniently happened to resonate with him. People will always open up about whatever’s troubling them if someone comes to them with the perfect words.

In the end, that’s all it was. I done good, right? Some bits I got lucky, but still, I

talked him around.

Here's the thing, though, oh, holy Man-God. Ever since talking with that guy, something's sat wrong with my spirit. Maybe we've missed a trick, y'know? I just get this feeling somewhere along the way we're gonna fall into a trap.

Well, my god—any idea what that's about?

About the Author:

Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, hitting number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publication.

"What one believes to be correct may not always be so," said the author.



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